

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty



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an injury to one is an injury to all

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WHERE NOW FOR PAKISTAN?

CENTRE PAGES



DANIEL BENSARD ON FRANCE'S NEW LEFT PARTY

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Construction strikes Yes, fight for jobs and union agreements — for all workers!

As *Solidarity* goes to press, workers' demonstrations over union-agreement coverage on construction projects had just been held at the power-station sites at Staythorpe in Nottinghamshire and the Isle of Grain in Kent.

These actions follow a week-long wave of unofficial strikes at power-station and refinery sites across Britain which defied the anti-union laws in a way not seen for decades. The campaign started with demonstrations at Staythorpe, stepped up with a strike from 28 January at Lindsey Oil Refinery in North Lincolnshire, and exploded across the country with strikes from 30 January.

The main slogans on the picket lines and at the mass meetings in the early stages were "British Jobs For British Workers" and "British Workers First".

On 2 February the Lindsey workers formulated precise demands, of which the leading one was for all workers on site to be under the national union agreement for the engineering construction industry. This highlighted class issues — the defence of union agreements, and union labour, against the use of subcontracting to break and displace them.

Around the same time, the "British Jobs For British Workers" cry — an attempt to co-opt a demagogic and reactionary phrase launched by Gordon Brown at the TUC Congress in September 2007 — receded in prominence. Conversations on picket lines and demonstrations with workers involved show, however, that the nationalist sentiments expressed in such slogans are not just something artificially attributed to the workers' movement by malevolent mass media.

In the construction industry, the issues mostly revolve around not "migrant labour" in the usual



Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

sense — workers who move from one country to another — but "posted workers", workforces hired by an employer where wages, conditions, or union coverage are weaker, in order to be "posted" temporarily in order to undercut workers' conditions and solidarity in another.

The subcontractor around which the Lindsey Oil Refinery dispute centred, IREM, is a non-union firm based in Sicily. The work for which they were brought in was a phase of the project expected to go to a British-based subcontractor with a workforce already on site: those workers stood to lose their jobs. Many of the "British" workers at Lindsey were not in fact British, but Irish; in one of the other walkouts on 2 February, at Langage power station in the south-west,

a number of the workers walking out were Polish.

The European Union has a "Posted Workers' Directive", dating from 1996, which appears to guarantee "posted" workers the rights and conditions won by workers in the country they are "posted" to. In fact it is full of loopholes, and often "posted" workers get only legal minimum entitlements. Recent European Court of Justice rulings have widened the loopholes.

In the Laval judgement of December 2007, the European Court of Justice ruled against Swedish trade union action to force a Latvian contractor, which had hired a workforce on Latvian wages and conditions for construction projects in Sweden, to respect Swedish union agreements.

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We need demands to unite the working class — not "British jobs for British workers"

ANTI-SEMITISM

An open letter to the editor of the Guardian

DEAR ALAN RUSBRIDGER,

The *Guardian* is the “house organ” of most of the non-Muslim people who took part in the two big demonstrations during the Gaza war. A vigorous campaign by the *Guardian* against anti-semitism on the “left” might do much good.

On Saturday 7 February, the *Guardian* carried an editorial, “Language and History”, denouncing anti-semitism and specifically the “anti-Zionist” anti-semitism that is now commonplace, remarking on the growth of anti-semitic incidents in Britain (now on average, one per day, and increasing).

Unfortunately, the editorial seriously misdefined the realities of what it discussed, and pussyfooted around the issue.

“Some extremists on the right and possibly [sic] the left might claim [that] the government is in the pocket of a ‘Jewish lobby’. There is no ‘Jewish lobby’ in the conspiratorial sense that the slur implies, and to assert that there is can only be the result of the kind of racism that has scarred Europe from tsarist Russia to the fascists and Stalinists of the 1930s through to the jihadists now. To present all Jewish people as coterminous with Israel and its supporters is a mistake with potentially terrible consequences. It aligns ethnicity with a political perspective, and it is simply racist”.

Indeed. The editorial records the Government’s statement that “unlike other forms of racism, antisemitism is being accepted within parts of society instead of being condemned.”

And the left? “Some within its ranks now risk sloppily allowing their horror of Israeli actions to blind them to anti-semitism.... Last month, a rally in defence

of the people of Gaza that included verbal attacks on the so-called ‘Nazi tendencies’ of Israel was followed by actual attacks on Jewish targets in north London”.

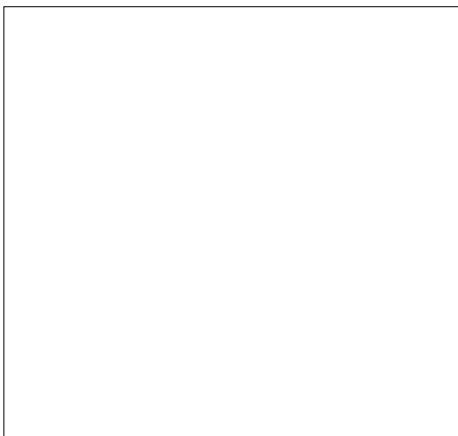
The editorial adds that such things as “kill Arabs” graffiti in Gaza are “chilling”. And? “The style in which that is condemned must not create the climate that allows scrawling ‘kill Jews’ on synagogues in Manchester”. The style....

The problem with all this is that it is so shot through with understatement that it seriously misrepresents the state of things. The demonstrations on Gaza “included verbal attacks on the so-called ‘Nazi tendencies’ of Israel”? Included? As we reported (www.workersliberty.org/gazademos) the demonstrations were entirely dominated by placards equating the Star of David and the Nazi swastika, Israel with South Africa, Gaza with the Nazi mass murder of Jews, or chants about a “Palestine” stretching “from the river to the sea”.

All the platform speakers, in their varying notes and tones, proclaimed the same sort of politics. The one-time British diplomat Craig Murray explicitly called for the abolition of Israel and the rolling-back of Middle East history to before 1948. An SWP organiser on the megaphone at one of the marches shouted that Israeli Jews should “go back to New York”.

The *Guardian* says that the left “possibly” subscribes to notions of an all-controlling “Jewish lobby”. Possibly? Moshe Machover came pretty close to saying it outright in the recent exchanges in this paper - and he is one of the most sophisticated of the “absolute anti-Zionists”.

Mr Rusbridger, the core and root of modern anti-Semitism is the denial of Israel’s right to exist and the defend itself. That inexorably leads on to a radical political hostility to most Jews alive.



How can you understate it?

Of course Jews and Israel are not co-terminous. They could hardly be! It is a fact that all but a few Jews — revolutionary socialists, Neturei Karta, etc. — feel connected with Israel, however critically, and however much they abhor such things as the onslaught on Gaza. How could a people with their history not have such attitudes?

The “demand” that the self-proclaimed left has made on British Jews — very aggressively on university campuses, for example - has been that they repudiate Israel, that they be not Zionists, that they accept that Israel is “racist” in essence and has no right to exist.

The denial of Israel’s right to exist, predominant on the self-proclaimed left, is the precondition for the bizarre alliance of so much of the left with political Islam (to give it its proper name, Islamic clerical fascism). It is what allows the self-proclaimed left, political Islam, and Islamic communalists to merge and meld almost indistinguishably on occasions like the Gaza demonstrations.

Inevitably that radical political hostility

to most Jews alive taps into the great half-buried septic reservoirs of old anti-semitism — into old racist, religious, and non-descript crank anti-semitism.

The *Guardian* writes of Nazi and Stalinist anti-Semitism in the 1930s. The worst Stalinist anti-semitism - from which come such things as the Stalinist-typical lunacy of equating Zionism and Nazism - erupted in the late 1940s and early 50s. The poisonous account of modern Jewish and Zionist history in the 20th century, which is dominant on the “left” originates in Stalinism.

These ideas of Stalinist “anti-Zionism” / anti-Semitism are rampant in the pro-Palestinian movement because they have conquered so much of the Trotskyism-rooted “left”. Young people who, to their credit, want to do something about such things as Gaza, come under the sway of the “smash Israel”, supposedly “pro-Palestinian” campaigns. The are taught to reject a “Two State” settlement.

For the *Guardian* editorial to sat that the difficulty lies in “the style” in which specific Israeli actions are criticised and condemned is simply preposterous. Whatever the “style” — and it varies from the seemingly reasonable to froth-at-the-mouth anti-semitism — the proposal to put an end to Israel leads inexorably to the things which the *Guardian* condemns, and to far worse.

The *Guardian* talks of the anti-semitism of the “jihadists”. The point is that the politics dominant in the Gaza demonstrations were entirely in line with the jihadists and their anti-semitism.

The *Guardian* has influence within the broad left. It is a pity you do not use that influence to tell the left the unpalatable truth about the state it’s in — hold the mirror up to people who should know better.

YOURS, SOLIDARITY

Fight for jobs for all workers

From the front page

The *Financial Times* of 7 February reported that “companies working in the [engineering construction] sector state privately” that they have chosen “posted” workforces because they can better select them to undercut the possibility of what they call “1970s-style” unofficial strikes, more common in this sector than in others.

The words “British Jobs For British Workers”, however, as they spread out to the general public, do not bring those ideas about union agreements and trade-union protections for migrant workers with them. On the contrary, there is a serious danger — against which socialists and trade-unionists must now fight — of them dividing workers as the economic crisis deepens, and encouraging some sections of the working class to turn against migrant workers, or even British-born workers whom they find insufficiently “British”, rather than uniting with them to fight for jobs.

The fight for jobs and for union agreements must continue, and the inspiration of the construction workers’ defiance of the anti-union laws must be built on — but combined with a fight for workers’ unity, international solidarity, and migrant workers’ rights.

The text below has been distributed as a

leaflet at construction workers’ demonstrations in the week starting 9 February.

On 5 February workers on strike at Total’s Lindsey Oil Refinery agreed a deal which marked a substantial industrial victory. The next phase of recruitment on the project, 100 or so jobs, will be UK-based. The contractors have agreed that all workers will be paid according to the national union agreement (NAECI).

None of the 100 Italian workers brought in by the non-union subcontractor IREM will be laid off. According to strike committee sources, the deal also allows for the shop stewards to check that the Italian and Portuguese workers are on the same conditions as the local workers covered by the national union agreement.

Despite this victory the deal leaves many issues unresolved, in terms of both workplace issues in the industry and the bigger political questions. This means other disputes will develop in this sector.

The slogans should be “Jobs For All”, “Work or Full Pay”, and “One Union Agreement For All”. “Workers should not pay for the bosses’ crisis in Britain or in Europe”.

• That the owners, of the refineries and power stations, open the books on the contractors and give the workers and their unions access to all information concerning

the tendering process and how much workers are being paid. Let the world see the true costs of subcontracting on pay and conditions!

• Access to all migrant workers to organise them. Contact overseas unions to work together on this. Demand that collective bargaining cover every worker on each site.

• For workers’ unity across the European Union! The bosses will plan across the EU whatever we do. We can fight back only by building strong links between unions in different EU countries. We should demand “levelling up” of wages and conditions everywhere to the best levels in the EU.

• Call for the direct recruitment of labour by oil and power companies, or by principal contractors, rather than use of subcontractors, whenever possible.

• Start a register of unemployed union members in construction and demand companies recruit from the register. Demand the Government intervene to guarantee jobs or a living rate of fall-back pay to all on the register. Workers from other countries should be eligible for the register by agreement with the unions in those countries.

• Globally, the unions need to get together to develop International Union Cards, recognised as giving union membership and rights in different countries by agreement between the unions concerned.

• Unions across the EU should call a conference to work out a common working-class demand to protect union agreements and workers’ legal protections against the use of subcontracting to undermine them (as licensed by the Viking and Laval rulings), while upholding the rights of migrant workers, both “legal” and “illegal”.

• Repeal of the anti-union laws which hobble the working-class whilst giving boss-

es free rein, and for a European charter of workers’ rights.

If the British Government can advance £1100 billion cash and credit guarantees to save the banks, it can also take the energy industries into public ownership, under workers’ control, and with working hours cut with no loss of pay in order to create new jobs. It can step up investment in “green” energy projects, creating thousands of socially useful jobs for construction workers. Capitalism is international.

Workers’ only reliable weapon against the international plans of the bosses is international unity.

Otherwise the bosses will always be able to play off the workers of one country against another.

The slogan “British Jobs for British workers”, used in the early stages of the Lindsey strike but then dropped, was picked up by the BNP and the far right to fuel hatred of all foreign workers and immigrants.

Some of the strikers may have meant, by “British workers”, just “workers recruited under British union agreements”, whether they are migrants who arrived recently, or from long-settled families. But that is not what the slogan “British Jobs for British Workers” will mean if it spreads. It will become a weapon to divide workers, setting longer-settled workers against the maybe two million migrant workers who are a major part of today’s “British” working class, and the mainstay of many vital sectors such as the Health Service. Only the bosses can gain from that.

And anyway, what are “British” jobs? Capitalism today is international, dominated by corporations which operate across the globe. The working class needs to become as international as capitalism!

CONSTRUCTION STRIKES

Yes, fight for jobs — but for all workers!

“We want to be careful with the nationalism, lads, so that things don’t turn nasty. I’ve got nothing against the Italian workers as such, they’re just doing a job, putting food on the table for their families.

“They’re not Without Papers, as they are EU citizens and are legally allowed to work here. Besides, this is racist. Many of us have worked abroad - Germany, Spain, Middle East - did we think or care about jobs in those countries? Getting at the workers is just going to give us a bad reputation, and turn the public against us.

“The problem is with the tenders, Total management and probably the Government for allowing foreign companies to undercut...” — A striker from the Lindsey Oil Refinery site, on the strikers’ website.

Wildcat strike action spread across the UK over a week or so from 30 January, in support of a strike by construction workers at the Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire over an Italian firm getting a contract for part of the refitting work on the refinery and bringing in its (non-union) permanent workforce of Italian workers to displace workers employed under the national union agreement for the engineering construction industry.

Part of the background to the strike is increased use of sub-contracting on construction jobs, using EU rulings which allow contractors to undercut union-negotiated agreements by employing sub-contractors from other EU countries.

On Monday 2 February the Lindsey strikers adopted a series of positive trade-union demands, and on 5 February they accepted a settlement giving serious concessions on those demands.

But socialists have faced the paradox that the most inspiring working-class movement for many years took place under a central slogan, “British Jobs For British Workers”, which cannot conceivably answer the needs which spur the action. What should our attitude be?

“When I see a worker fighting with a policeman, I don’t need to ask myself which side I’m on”. That was George Orwell commenting on the conflict between the anarchist workers of Barcelona in 1937, and the bourgeois-Stalinist military police who repressed them.

Leon Trotsky wrote this in 1938: “In... even [the] patriotism of the oppressed, there are elements which reflect... a clinging to what they believe to be their own good... defence of [their] home, [their] families and other similar families... elements which we must know how to seize upon in order to draw the requisite conclusions”.

These quotations show the attitude that socialists who flatly reject the slogan under which the strikers mobilised must take to this movement.

The striking workers at construction sites in the energy industry simply ignored the Tory anti-union laws, under which solidarity strikes are illegal. In effect they ripped them up. Strong, determined action can defy the law. The action shows that: government and employers made no move to use the law against it.

Other workers will learn from what the strikers have done. They see trade-union solidarity in action for the first time in many years.

The workers on strike are our people. We are on their side. This is a tremendous working-class movement that must act as a stimulant to other workers faced with defending themselves in the greatest capitalist crisis in three quarters of a century. It is an eruption of class struggle that may be the harbinger of many such struggles. Other workers will, indeed, learn from this example to act and to defy the anti-union laws.

But some will also be miseducated into picking up the worker-dividing demand: “British jobs for British workers”. There is a real danger that nationalism and xenophobia will grow as workers in Europe struggle to hold onto jobs. A central reason for this is that trade unions lack a strategy to fight for jobs on a Europe-wide basis.

The strike-wave’s nationalism reflects the reality and the political limits of the working-class movement.

Nationalism, sexism and crawling to the tabloid press... Derek Simpson, the official “left” candidate for re-election as general secretary of Amicus/Unite, works hard for his £200,000 a year and £800,000 Hertfordshire mansion, joining the rabid campaign of the Daily Star.

Photo: Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

Within the European Union there are still tremendous reserves of nationalism, and fusions of class-consciousness and nationalism.

If the British “Labour” prime minister raises the slogan “British Jobs For British Workers”, as he has done, it is not surprising that workers pick up on it. What was distinctive, what was new, about the strike movement was not the potentially suicidal nationalism, which, among other things it can divide the British working class along “immigrant” and “native” lines, but the militancy, the wildfire spread of solidarity action, and the magnificent contempt for the vicious Tory anti-union legislation which “New Labour” has kept on the statute books for the dozen years it has been in power.

This sort of militancy has been absent in Britain for many years. Socialists cannot put our internationalism and our programme — working class unity across borders and the unity of all the workers within the existing national borders — as an ultimatum to workers acting on their existing level of trade-union and social awareness. We have to combine siding with the workers with arguing within the workers’ movement against nationalist blind alleys and for international working class solidarity.

Rapid, rank-and-file organised action is needed in the current economic crisis, where thousands of jobs are being lost every day. We need industrial and political action to oppose job cuts, stop casualisation and the driving down of wages and conditions and demand what the labour movement has called “work or full pay”, i.e. the demand for the government to organise decent jobs for all or a living income for those not in jobs.

But Italian workers are not to blame for the capitalist crisis. Nor are any other workers! Keeping out foreign workers will not stop soaring unemployment. What it will do is boost prejudices against workers from other countries and divide the working class, further strengthening the bosses’ power over us.

As the wildcat strikes began to spread, our sisters and brothers in France showed the real way forward, in a national general strike against the attacks on the whole working-class in this global economic crisis. It follows

on from the general strikes in Greece and Italy late last year under the universal working-class slogan for these times: “We will not pay for your crisis”.

“We” there means workers all over the world, including all over Europe. We need action directed against Gordon Brown’s government and the big employers, rather than echoing Gordon Brown’s slogans. action on demands such as:

- Tax the rich and business to rebuild public services, creating millions of secure and socially useful jobs. Step up, not cut, investment in “green” energy alternatives, under direct public ownership! This is necessary to save the planet, and will create many thousands of jobs for construction workers.

- Workers’ unity across the EU. British unions and shop stewards should be working with European unions and shop stewards to deal with the global corporations and the global capitalist markets, for example by “levelling up” workers’ rights and protections across the EU. The longstanding campaigns against the European Union are nourished in large part by the fear that the more extensive workers’ rights and protections won by the labour movements in France or Italy, Germany or Sweden, but lost in Britain since the Tory onslaught of the 1980s, may spill over through the EU into Britain. The Tories and New Labour has sought opt-outs for the UK from EU legislation, notably on the Working Time and Agency Workers Directives. British workers work the longest hours in Europe and have fewer individual and union rights at work. To deal with the global crisis, and the inescapable reality of capitalist corporations which contract and sub-contract, allocate and reallocate, across the globe, workers need not a “British-first” mentality, but workers’ unity and solidarity across Europe and the world.

- Work or full pay, that is decent jobs or decent benefits, for all workers — in Britain and across the European Union! If the government can advance £1100 billion in cash and credit guarantees to save the banks, it can also take the energy industries into public ownership, under workers’ control, and with working hours cut with no loss of pay to create new jobs. It can do the same in the car and car-components industries, hard-hit by job cuts.

- There should be an unemployed register for construction workers, with the Government enforcing a levy on the industry to pay them a living income when the industry does not find a job for them.

- Workers’ unity to demand jobs for all, through increased investment and shorter hours. All contracted labour should be under a common union agreement. The details of all contracts and sub-contracts should be open to union inspection. Where workers from other countries are employed on sites, the unions on the site should have access to them, and should work with the unions in those workers’ home countries to ensure that the workers have representation, together with other workers on the site, via a union recognised on the site.

The slogans of “British workers first”, or “British jobs for British workers” cannot but turn worker against worker. Politically they are the wrong slogans — and potentially disastrous slogans.

Workers at Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago, USA, recently occupied their factory when the bosses shut it down. The occupation was completely illegal under US law. But the owner and the police did not dare use the law. The workers won what they demanded: back pay and pension money. Now it looks as if they may have won what at first they did not even dare to demand: the reopening of the plant.

The Republic Windows workers — many of them migrants or of recent Latin-American migrant origin — aimed their struggle against the bosses and the Bank of America (the bosses’ financier), not against other workers.

Workers should not pay for the bosses’ crisis! Work or full pay for all! Workers’ unity across Europe! Fight nationalism and racism in the British labour movement!

IN BRIEF

NHS PRIVATISATION: A massive transformation is taking place in primary care as the division is made between commissioning and providing services.

By April 2009 Primary Care Trusts are expected to have formalised the separation between their providing and commissioning arms and plans are to be in place for the transformation of the providing body into an independent organisation.

What this represents is the further introduction of the market into health-care — it will mean driving down quality and serious threat to the terms and conditions and the jobs of many thousands of NHS staff who may be forcibly moved into the employ of non-NHS organisations.

At the PCT where I work as the process towards separation steams ahead we have already been presented with a list of services currently provided by the PCT which are at risk as they do not offer “value for money” for the commissioners. Top of the list is a local NHS palliative care centre which offers fantastic care for people in the most difficult of situations. We are told that this service cannot compete with hospices, which are likely to be commissioned to provide palliative care in the community.

Why can it not compete? Because the hospices offer the same for less money — except they don’t, because the savings have been made either in quality of care offered or in the terms and conditions offered to the staff.

The biggest threat for staff is the possible transformation of providing organisations into social enterprises. One or two such organisations already exist, for example Central Surrey Health is a social enterprise created from the existing NHS services.

Social Enterprise — once you peel away all the fluffy management speak designed to sell them to staff — are businesses. They can succeed or fail like private businesses and that fact has serious implications for job security for the workers involved.

Staff employed by the NHS currently work under terms and conditions that although not the best offer some security and a final salary pension scheme. These things are now under threat.

At present you cannot be part of the NHS pension scheme if you are not an NHS employee. A pensions passport is being sought to allow staff who are moved to a social enterprise to retain their NHS pension but this would only apply to existing staff. New staff would be employed under different terms and conditions: a two-tier work force.

These moves must be fought. In my own Unison branch, we organised a vocal campaign amongst staff members against moves to transform our providing branch into a social enterprise. Over 400 staff members turned up to a consultation day and almost unanimously demanded to remain as NHS employees. Our boards have since decided to try for NHS community trust status which represents a victory for our campaign. But the threat of social enterprise remains as it is the second option should a bid for trust status fail.

We are continuing the campaign as well as focusing on recruitment and organisation to try to prepare the union for possible disputes in the future. There are many barriers to organising health workers into a coherent body but this must be done if the fight to defend NHS services is to have any hope of success.

A London healthworker

WORKERS’ RIGHTS

Snowed in and frozen out

By JANINE BOOTH

The heavy snowfall at the beginning of February prevented many people from attending work. While a few employers did the decent thing and paid them anyway, many workers have found themselves losing pay or leave.

The small minority included Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust and Croydon Council, which not only paid staff who could not attend, but gave staff who did make it to work an extra day’s leave entitlement to thank them! Union reps in other workplaces should demand that their employers do the same.

Some other employers allowed staff to work from home, or at locations other than their normal workplace that were easier to get to, or allowed workers to go home early.

These, however, were the exceptions. *Solidarity* has heard from many workers whose bosses will deduct either pay or leave for the days of absence - and even an NHS employer which refused to grant carer’s leave for staff whose children were unable to attend school, in breach of its own policy!

Some schools have tried to dock pay, claiming that the kids got in OK, failing to take into account that teaching and other staff often live further away, and that some could not even get out of their streets. We have also received reports of hospitals and local authorities cancelling services to clients, but still penalising the workers who were unable to attend work to deliver the cancelled services!

One NHS worker told us, “Everyone is angry about it - especially as management didn’t bother to show until the thaw.”

Greenwich Primary Care Trust told its staff that they should take the snow days

as days owing or annual leave. One worker explained that, “The managers are pushing for the day owing and asking people to work an extra shift (or two, if they could not get in on Tuesday) in the next month. Our ward manager is arguing that a) our country is in crisis so we need to do our bit b) our failing PFI needs our support because it has got itself into huge debt. We should make it clear who should pay for the crisis and what we do about PFIs.

“The most shocking thing at our trust was that the support staff (cleaners, porters, domestics), all employed by ISS, were not offered taxis or beds, and most people I’ve spoken to had long walks home. I’m going to take it up with the union.”

Trade unions should raise this issue as a matter of urgency, demanding that no-one be penalised for being physically unable to attend work. The TUC issued a statement arguing that “workers should not have to foot the bill for bad weather conditions”, but was at pains to point out to employers that if they behaved like “Scrooge bosses”, it would add to their “business woes” by demoralising staff!

“Get to work you lazy good for nothing”

London Underground workers were particularly annoyed to face loss of pay or leave, when the reason that many of them could not get to work was that their own employer – Transport for London (TfL) – had cancelled all the buses!

Within a few days, nearly 50 workers had put their names to a collective grievance organised by RMT, and company Directors had to discuss it with union officials. As the grievance stated, “This was not a day’s holiday for us, but a day on which we tried to get to work but could not. This situation arose through no fault of our own.”

Tube unions TSSA and RMT both issued press releases, leading to high-profile coverage in London, and a week after the heaviest snowfall, the Evening Standard reported that Mayor Boris Johnson had backtracked, his spokesperson saying: “The Mayor has absolutely no intention of penalising anyone who failed to get to work due to last week’s exceptional weather.” It seems that making a fuss has made the employers back down, although workplace union reps will still have battles on their hands about individual cases.

RAIL: Train drivers working for Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) took unofficial strike action over the weekend of 7-8 February. On ATW Sunday driving is not part of the normal working week and is voluntary. This enables drivers to all refuse to drive on a particular Sunday if they feel they have a point to make.

Their dispute is about pay. ATW drivers are paid £32,168 pa, which is low compared with other Train Operating Companies (TOCs).

Their dispute follows other (now settled) disputes in the company by other grades, also over pay.

Pay negotiations for drivers however have not been settled. Hence the week-end’s stay-away.

LONDON UNDERGROUND: 50 RMT members and supporters demonstrated outside London Underground HQ on 11 February to oppose LUL’s plan to sack 1,000 workers formally employed by engineering contractor Metronet but recently brought back in-house. Meanwhile, union-employer talks on the cuts did not even begin due to management’s behaviour.

LUL negotiators showed that they are determined to push through the cuts by trying to weasel out of the ‘jobs for life’ deal previously won by all Metronet employees; refusing to initiate procedures to assess the impact of jobs cuts on health and safety; and even attempting to limit the number of union reps

who could attend the meeting. Quite reasonably, the union negotiators therefore refused to proceed.

An ex-Metronet strike committee has been called for Friday 13 February to discuss a ballot for strike action.

The RMT’s London Transport Region is under new management, with the election of the left candidate, long-standing rank-and-file militant Steve Hedley, as the regional organiser. This will be a first test. From the victimisation of reps to the upcoming pay negotiations, the class struggle Underground is hotting up – which makes drawing the line in the sand by stopping this jobs slaughter all the more important.

TUBE CLEANERS: Following last summer’s strike by London Underground cleaners, the attacks on RMT ‘cleaning grade’ activists by ISS, the Tube’s largest cleaning contractor, intensified throughout January. Mary Boakye, RMT rep at the Northumberland Park depot, was outrageously sacked following an accident at work in October, reinstated and then sacked again. Cleaning grades committee secretary Clara Osagiede was cleared up trumped up charges of going home early only after a large protest outside the ISS offices on 8 January.

A well attended public meeting took place on 23 January; on 26, another protest at the ISS offices took place, with

supporters occupying them for a time. That day ISS sacked Philip Mambuliya, the cleaning grade chairman, in connection with a dodgy National Insurance number six years ago, even though there is currently no problem with his immigration status.

This is class warfare! The campaign of protests and direct action will continue; meanwhile the RMT is building support for another a new cleaners’ strike.

• www.rmtlondoncalling.org.uk and www.workersliberty.org/twblog

IRELAND: On 4 February, more than ten thousand students marched through Dublin in protest at the Irish governments’ plan to reintroduce higher education fees. Now the Irish trade unions are to hold mass demonstrations across the country on Saturday 21 February in response to the crisis.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has published a 10-point plan for a “fairer approach”. It includes a property tax on second homes, increased taxes on the rich, three years’ protection against repossessions and some tame job creation measures.

Hardly revolutionary, in other words; deeply inadequate. And yet the Irish trade unions’ attempts to mobilise in the crisis, whatever their limitations, put the British unions to shame. Industrial action in a whole series of industries and parts of the public sector looks possible.

REPORTAGE

Daily Star tries to hijack construction protests

Workers' Liberty activists report from the Isle of Grain power station construction project, in Kent

Sixty to eighty construction workers gathered here on Wednesday 11 February for a demonstration organised by the unions, GMB and Unite. The political issues were posed most sharply when a team arrived from the *Daily Star* to try to give out printed "British Jobs For British Workers" posters and get a photo-shoot of workers holding them.

The union banners and flags had no such slogan, instead calling for "fairness" or "a chance" for local workers. Many of the workers on the demonstration were clear that the issue for them was coverage on the job for union agreements.

When the *Daily Star* people arrived, we, and some of the workers, tried to stop them setting up their photo-shoot. But a small group on the demonstration, maybe eight people, were keen to take the placards, and in the end the *Daily Star* got its photo.

That small group left the demonstration soon afterwards, and in conversations after that most workers agreed that it was a bad thing that the *Daily Star* had been able to pull off its stunt.

The union officials on the protest behaved poorly, disapproving of the *Daily Star* stunt but doing nothing vigorous to obstruct it. At the same time, their speeches told the workers that it will be "a long campaign", taking years. Such an approach cannot but tend to push some workers towards seizing on the *Daily Star* approach as a way to get things done faster. Despite the demonstration being an official union event, few workers had a good word to say for Unite leader Derek Simpson.

Many workers agreed in discussion that what's really needed is an international union battle for EU-wide guarantees of workers' rights. One of the things this struggle is showing is the limits of purely or mainly national trade unionism.

But — not surprisingly, given the feeble bureaucratic nature of such international trade union activity as there is — many workers were also sceptical about active international solidarity. Many reckoned that "Europe hasn't worked".

Some were straightforwardly nationalist, and happy enough with the slogan "British Jobs For British Workers". Some saw the demand for jobs to come under union agreements as a way not so much to secure workers' as to deter contractors from employing workers from other countries.

A local Labour councillor spoke at the demonstration, saying that a major issue was getting contractors to take on apprentices rather than cutting apprentices and relying instead on importing labour. She also said that wildcat strikes were not the way to pursue the workers' demands, a comment which got a hostile response.

Talking strikes

Two other comrades and I went to Hoo on the Isle of Grain on Saturday 7 February to talk to local workers and residents. We have visited the area before as socialist activists at the Climate Camp. We had some long conversations

Liam Conway was on the construction workers' demonstration at the Staythorpe power station site in Nottinghamshire on Wednesday 11 February:

"About 200 workers, including some from the Lindsey Oil Refinery site, joined the demonstration. A big banner there said 'End discrimination — no exploitation — no xenophobia', though British Jobs For British Workers posters and Union Jacks were quite visible.

"There were also official flags, and a bland official leaflet, from Unite. None of it made clear precisely what were the demands of the demonstration, as distinct from placards or other material expressing union or individual opinions in a general way. Some workers were emphatic that for them the issue was trade union rights, but opinion probably differed.

"There was a heavy police presence. One of the *Daily Star's* British Jobs for British Workers posters was visible, but, at least when I was there, the *Daily Star* did not attempt a photo-shoot stunt like the one at the Isle of Grain."

with a group of men who were all locals, but none of whom worked on the plant, although they had family members working at Kingsnorth. They knew very little about the strikes but wanted to talk about them, climate change, banks, protesters, capitalism in general.

We then went to a pub in Grain, where it was pretty exciting to see our "Workers Climate Action" leaflet on "Just Transition" up on the wall. Again people were keen to chat about the strikes and protest to come.

The people I spoke to did tend to see the strikes as being about getting foreign workers out. One man said he thought

this had been brewing for a long time, and was going to continue for a long time to come. He said people being angry about foreigners getting the jobs.

"Open the Books" was a fairly good starting point, along with "Jobs for All", which needed much further discussion.

We arranged to show the film *Rocking the Foundations* in a local social club; the film shows how Australian building workers built up a militant fight against the power of big business, for the environment and sustainable communities.

Rebecca

MIGRANT WORKERS

Unions must help migrant workers organise

Alan Fraser is a GMB union official involved in helping migrant workers organise. He spoke to *Solidarity*.

Recent events — and not just recent events, the last few years — demonstrate that we need stronger links with European unions and other unions internationally. We need an international union card that is transferrable and can be used wherever you are working.

As regards the "Posted Workers' Directive", I understand that some of the union leaders made some quite serious points about it around the Warwick Agreement [of 2004, between the union leaders and the Labour Party leaders]. But the unions need to put much more pressure on the Government than they have been doing with regard to codifying and clarifying what we actually want on the Posted Workers' Directive.

Studying the union material, I've seen a lot about what's wrong with the Posted Workers' Directive, but not much about what the unions are demanding. And we need a concerted campaign by unions across Europe on the issue.

There are an enormous number of positives that come out of the recent construction workers' strikes, at the same

time as we have to be very sober about some of the slogans.

With the slogans, there were probably xenophobic comments being made. There was also a group of workers taking on the anti-union laws, a group of workers taking rank-and-file action and trying to control their own strike through their own strike committee. Both migrant and indigenous workers can draw the conclusion that if they do unite, then they have possibilities of taking on the employers.

We need much more progressive migrant-worker strategies within the unions, more discussion in the unions about how to address the organising of migrant workers and how to link them with indigenous workers. That needs structure, it needs resources, it needs a set of policies which are not prevalent enough in the unions.

We have to get across the fact that there is no such thing as "British Jobs For British Workers". That slogan, launched by Gordon Brown, does strike a chord with some workers who may think that migrant workers in Britain are "taking the jobs" of British workers and if you take those workers out, then you get jobs for "British" workers.

That doesn't stack up. Migrant workers have taken on millions of jobs which are the "three Ds" — difficult, dirty, and

dangerous. It's our jobs as socialists and trade unionists to link up with those migrant workers and put demands for government investment into jobs, not just investment into banks to reflate capitalism.

We should be talking about a workers' plan for jobs for both migrant and indigenous workers.

There is nothing new about migrant workers coming to Britain or leaving Britain. The reality is that there are millions of migrant workers here and our job is to help them organise. There have been reports of large numbers of migrant workers already returning to Eastern Europe, in particular, but I don't really buy that.

One Polish trade unionist described to me the atmosphere in Poland now as reminiscent of what he has been told Britain was like in the 1980s under Thatcherism. The idea that lots of Polish workers will choose to go back to that doesn't really stack up. Economic conditions are as bleak in Poland than here, in fact bleaker.

In the GMB we have adopted a self-organising approach with migrant workers. We have used training and education around the English classes to help support migrant workers. Once we've established relations with those migrant workers, we have tracked them to partic-

ular workplaces. We've set up meetings with groups of migrant workers in order to collectivise their issues and their problems.

A key ingredient has been the employment by the union of migrant workers as project organisers. You must have migrant workers working for the union, recruiting, organising, and campaigning.

We have also created an internal structure so that we have the possibility of a coordinated migrant worker strategy in our region.

We've had situations where there has been, maybe, a 60/40 split in a workplace between migrant workers and indigenous workers, and the employers have tried to split off the indigenous workers from the migrant workers. We have been able to talk to both groups of workers, ensure that the issues are collectivised, encourage migrant workers to become activists.

On "undocumented" workers, our union's position is clear: all workers deserve to be supported by the union. If we can't reach undocumented workers, then the employers will use those undocumented workers to undermine union organisation.

Undocumented workers need proper rights from day one — rights to stay, and the social rights that go with that.

AFGHANISTAN

Obama’s policy: really “realistic”?

By MARTIN THOMAS

The USA's new vice-president, Joe Biden, has announced that Washington is conducting a “strategic review” on Afghanistan with a view to setting “clear and achievable” goals.

The *Guardian* reports a senior Nato official present at Biden’s briefing as saying Washington’s emphasis on Afghanistan was shifting to “being much more realistic”, adding: “It doesn’t need to be a democracy, just secure.”

In his election campaign, Barack Obama pledged to withdraw US troops from Iraq (something that the Bush administration had already committed the USA to, in the deal it signed last year with the Baghdad government), but said that the military resources freed from Iraq would be redirected to war in Afghanistan.

There must be some possibility that Obama was playing “fake right”, seeking to rope in voters who would run scared from any candidate who seemed militarily “soft”, rather than making a determined commitment to more warfare in Afghanistan. Maybe the troop “surge” which he is expected to organise for Afghanistan will be aimed to secure the conditions for an orderly rundown of the US military presence rather than increased warfare to get control over Afghanistan for the US and its allies.

But maybe not; and maybe a “surge” aimed at getting conditions for a US military retreat will develop its own contrary logic, drawing the US into more and more war. Functioning bourgeois democracy in Afghanistan is a very remote goal; but “security” there, in any comprehensive sense, is remote too.

It is hard to see how anything but bad could come out of an increased US war effort. When the US invaded Afghanistan after the 11 September 2001 Al Qaeda attack on New York and Washington, the Taliban regime fell quickly. There is no reason to suppose that the rejoicing in the streets of Kabul at the Taliban’s fall was insincere. Kabul’s population has increased by two-thirds since the Taliban were ousted.

Seven years on, however, Afghanistan

is still in chaos, and the chaos is getting worse rather than better. The Taliban has revived, and is now frequently able to stage attacks in Kabul itself.

Afghanistan has always been resistant to foreign conquest — from the British in the 19th century to Russia in 1979-88. More: the country has never really had an effective central government. Even if there was a nominal king or paramount chief, the real authority in most of the territory was local clan leaders.

However widely hated the Taliban was, there were reasons making its revival likely. In 2002 a lot of its forces just retreated over the border into Pakistan, where the Taliban had first been recruited and established.

The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, drawn by British colonialists, has never had much force on the ground. The Pashtun people straddles the frontier. The frontier areas of Pakistan have never been solidly under the control of its central government, and today are almost entirely controlled by the Taliban and other warlords.

Short of conquering a large chunk of Pakistan, the US could never hope to do more militarily than push the Taliban back temporarily. The US has been bombing those areas of Pakistan; this policy fails to defeat the Taliban, but simultaneously antagonises (and drives

Increased US war effort in Afghanistan

behind the Taliban) the local population, and makes the Pakistani military (in any case much honeycombed with Islamists of various stripes) even more reluctant to cooperate effectively with the US against the Taliban.

And then the new government installed in Kabul by the Americans has been notoriously incapable of securing effective civil administration or winning wide popularity. For its Afghan allies the US relied on a congeries of non-Pushtoon Islamist groups, which already before 2001 held sizeable areas of northern Afghanistan outside Taliban control. The new president installed under US auspices and still in office, Hamid Karzai, was chosen because of his Pushtoon ethnic origin and his family’s close links with the old monarchy, but now US officials openly decry the corruption and ineffectiveness of the Karzai administration; and anyway the Pushtoon areas were always likely to distrust a Kabul government dominated by groups based among the northern peoples.

International aid funds have been insufficient, and when they have arrived, have been siphoned off in corruption and luxury projects benefiting only a tiny minority of the population. Most of the country remains economically dependent on opium smuggling; the

US alternates between militant declarations about stamping out the trade, and resigned acceptance that it cannot put any economic alternatives in place.

“Security” in the sense that it would be understood in, say, Europe is probably unattainable in any assayable future. Increased US warfare not only fails to defeat the Taliban, but does not even wear it down; rather, it seems to work more to drive people behind the Taliban, out of resentment against the foreign bombers.

A return to power for the Taliban would not be a lesser evil even than the present chaos, but is by no means a necessary result of a US withdrawal. The people who have moved to Kabul since the Taliban fell would be minded to resist, and Afghanistan now has an 80,000 strong army.

That an Islamist group is dominant in one or another area, even large area, of Afghanistan, does not necessarily mean that it is well-placed to conquer the whole territory. After Russian declared its war against the Islamist resistance unwinnable and withdrew in 1988, it took four years before Islamists ousted the rump Stalinist regime from Kabul, and another four years before the Taliban took the capital. The Taliban never conquered the whole country. Local Islamist-warlord rule without US bombing is not obviously a worse option than local Islamist-warlord rule with US bombing.

As far as we know, talk of a working-class alternative within Afghanistan has no grip. There must be a fair number of wage-workers in Kabul now. In 1988-92, even with the rump Stalinist regime in Kabul, AWL supported defence of the cities, with their slightly better social conditions, against being overrun by the Islamist militias which controlled the Afghan countryside; surely we would do similar now. But there is no concentrated industry, and little labour movement.

A great deal depends on Pakistani politics, and the development and activity of the labour movement in Pakistan. But there is little reason to suppose that Obama’s surge, even tempered by Biden’s “realism”, will help that.

WORKERS OF THE WORLD

By IRA BERKOVIC

GUADELOUPE

The French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe has been rocked by a general strike — a total shut-down of shops, supermarkets, schools and public services. A demonstration on 24 January saw 25,000 workers take to the streets; an equivalent demonstration in Britain would comprise over 3,000,000 protestors.

The UGTG (General Union of Guadeloupean Workers) has led the strike, along with nearly fifty other working-class organisations which have cohered into “The Committee Against Extreme Exploitation”. Guadeloupe is officially an overseas territory of the French Republic, although it appears that most mainstream labour organisations in mainland France have missed the opportunity to highlight and solidarise with a

general strike that coincided almost exactly with their own.

The key demands of the strike focus on basic daily necessities, including reduction in transport and housing costs, permanent contracts for temporary workers and an immediate €200 increase in the minimum wage. The action looks set to spread, with unions on neighbouring Martinique already launching a one-day general strike on 5 February.

- More in the next issue of *Solidarity*.

ISRAEL

Israeli rail workers are having to contend with both hostile public opinion and intense opposition from the bureaucracy of their own union following wild-cat strike action.

Passengers have filed a class action law suit to the tune of NIS 12 million, and

leaders of the workers’ union (the Israeli Railway Workers’ Union) and the Histadrut (the Israeli equivalent of the TUC) both came out strongly against the strikes, calling them “unruly and illegal” and ordering them to return to work. The strike was coordinated by a rank-and-file committee (the union’s official leading committee has ceased functioning following a police probe into alleged corruption) in opposition to a wave of summary dismissals of workers and their replacements with individuals considered loyal to management.

UNITED STATES

The United Steelworkers union has reached an agreement with oil industry bosses, averting potential strike action by over 20,000 oil workers in the United States. The deal covers issues such as

wages and benefits, although the union remains unsatisfied with the bosses’ intransigence on giving workers’ representatives an official role in enforcing health and safety agreements.

Threats of a strike had pushed the price of crude oil below \$41. The dispute will be of particular interest to activists in Britain given its proximity to workers’ struggles in our own oil industry, as well as because USW is formally part of the same global union as Unite.

Although oil workers’ disputes have not thus far taken up environmental demands, socialists in the ecological movement should be heartened by increasing displays of militancy by workers in frontline polluting industries and work to ensure that such militancy is in future wielded on the basis of politics that advocate worker-led transitions away from environmentally-unstable energy production.

ISRAEL

As right gains, step up solidarity with Israeli left

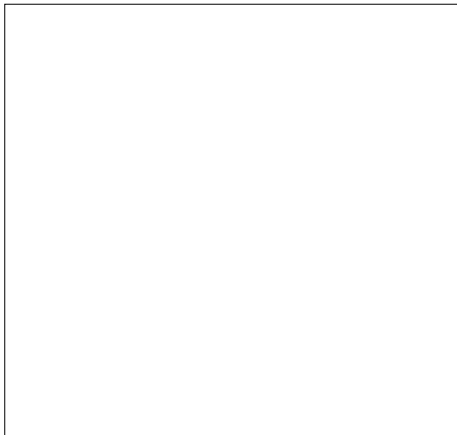
BY IRA BERKOVIC

As we go to press, both of Israel's main centre-right parties — Likud and Kadimah — were claiming victory in the general election. Most exit polls gave 30 seats to Kadimah and 29 to Likud. Neither have enough seats to win outright, meaning the huge gains made by Avigdor Lieberman's Israel Beiteinu party place this grotesque far-right formation in a position of enormous influence and power when it comes to forming a government. Ehud Barak's Labour Party — right-wing social democrats on social issues and hawkish on the national question — have been relegated to fourth place.

As placards on Israeli demonstrations against the recent assault on Gaza put it, "in the election campaign, the graveyards won."

It took a Supreme Court ruling to overturn a ban, vociferously argued for by Lieberman, on the participation of the two main Israeli-Arab parties in the election.

Lieberman is an Israeli-Jewish chauvinist who has openly called for population transfers of Palestinian Arabs;



Lieberman holds balance of power

Israeli socialists have labelled him "a fascist".

For those on the British left who deny the legitimacy of any Israeli-Jewish presence in the region, and insist that Israeli-Jews are a colonial settler caste akin to the South African Boers, Lieberman's rise will be further evidence that all Israeli-Jews are blood-thirsty racists.

Those leftists for whom hatred of Israel, rather than solidarity with the Palestinians, is the point of departure

may well rub their hands in glee at these results, claiming that they vindicate their perspectives. Those of us who take a different view — and maintain a belief in the national rights of Israeli-Jews and, though the questions are separate, in the revolutionary potential of the Israeli-Jewish working-class — assess this growth of Israel's reactionary right differently.

As socialists in the UK, who face the likely victory of a Tory government at the next election as well as growing working-class support for the fascist BNP, we should know better than to use these elections to write off the Israeli people (or the Israeli working-class).

Israeli workers are suffering economically from years of neo-liberal government policy. Furthermore, they are fed on a diet of propaganda, from media and state, that constantly reminds them of the threats to their personal and national security, and emphasises the need for an uncompromising military response.

The top-to-bottom militarisation of society through national service normalises the place of guns, soldiers and war in everyday life. The mainstream bourgeois parties ratcheted up this propaganda offensive to build support for their assault on Gaza, but

Lieberman — not Netanyahu, Livni or Barak — has benefited.

The results for leftist parties offer some glimmers of hope; most exit polls have Meretz, a politically inconsistent but broadly leftish social-democratic party (which ran as part of a new left-wing coalition) losing only one of its 5 MKs, with Hadash (a Jewish-Arab party with its origins in the Stalinist Israeli Communist Party) increasing its number of MKs to 4 or 5.

More widely, the continuing existence of a radical peace movement — led by organisations such as Gush Shalom and Anarchists Against The Wall and backed up by a growing movement of Israelis facing jail for refusing to serve in the IDF — should help us maintain our faith in the role of the Israeli people in carving out a solution to the conflict that sidelines the likes of Lieberman for good.

As Israeli peace activist Adam Keller says, if Lieberman in 2009 reflects what Israel sees in the mirror, "it is not enough to smash [it] — it is necessary to change thoroughly what this mirror reflects!" By making practical solidarity with the anti-war movements, the refusers and all working-class resistance to neo-liberalism, we can help Israelis begin to do that.

IRAQ

A race between Maliki and the workers

BY RHODRI EVANS

Iraq's provincial elections on 1 February confirmed the picture that the Maliki government is gaining strength, though also the fact that the foundations of that strength are fragile.

Prime minister Nuri al-Maliki's Dawa party did best in the elections. Maliki used the occasion to rebuff the new US vice-president Joe Biden, who had called for more US pressure on the Iraqi government for political reform. "The time for [US] pressure is past", declared Maliki, who last year negotiated a deal under which US troops are supposed to quit Iraq's cities by June this year, and the whole country by 2011.

Dawa is the "original" Shia-Islamist party of Iraq, going back to the clerical-conservative reaction to the first large emergence of the Iraqi labour movement in 1958-63. Dawa's longstanding government and election-coalition partner, ISCI, did badly in the provincial elections.

ISCI is a later offshoot. It originated in exile, after 1980, under Iranian government sponsorship, although Iran's ties to Dawa now seem as strong as to ISCI, and it was an ISCI candidate whom the US unsuccessfully backed for prime minister against Maliki after the December 2005 elections in Iraq. Under Maliki, Iran-Iraq trade has grown from \$1.8 billion in 2006 to \$4 billion in 2008, and a major conference of the two governments on strengthening economic ties opened on 11 February in Baghdad.

In Baghdad, Dawa got 38% of the vote this time (31% in 2005); ISCI got 5% (55% in 2005). In Basra, Dawa went up from 7%

to 37%, ISCI went down from 49% to 12%.

A Dawa splinter led by Ibrahim al-Jaafari, prime minister before Maliki, did fairly well in some areas. The Sadrist movement, Shia Islamists with a more militant popular base and more strident anti-American rhetoric, did poorly, going down from 36% to 15% in Maysan, which they previously dominated, and scoring 9% in Baghdad and 5% in Basra. Fadhila, another more popular-based Shia Islamist party, which has played a large part since 2003 in Basra politics, got only 3% there.

The Worker-communist Party of Iraq did not contest the elections. The very tame Communist Party of Iraq took part in some coalition slates which got small scores (1% in Baghdad, for example).

Dawa's campaign downplayed religion and stressed Iraqi nationalism, national unity, and the Maliki's government's claims to provide a stable "State of Law". ISCI's campaign stressed religion and pushed the policy which has long differentiated ISCI from Dawa (and made ISCI an ally of the relatively secular Kurdish warlord parties): a conversion of Iraq into a loose federation of super-regions.

The election result suggests what opinion surveys have also indicated, that most Iraqis, most Arab Iraqis anyway, do not want regionalism and would prefer an only moderately Islamist government.

Dawa got the biggest vote in nine regions. In five regions, mostly Sunni, the picture was complicated. In Anbar province (very heavily Sunni) there are allegations of vote-rigging by the

"Awakening Councils" (former Sunni "resistance" groups which in 2007 were persuaded to switch to operating under US pay) against the Iraqi Islamic Party (Iraqi offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, and a party which has been in most of the governments and councils since 2003).

The vote was very scattered: although Dawa was the biggest party in nine regions, in several of those its vote was only 10 to 20%. The process of forming coalitions to run provincial governments will be long and complicated. The relative stabilisation in Iraq is still fragile, and any one of a number of tensions could quickly take things back to the effective civil war of 2006 and early 2007.

Part of the reason for the scattering of the vote was the presence of very large numbers of independent candidates who could identify themselves publicly. In previous elections Iraqis have voted for party lists, with all but a few candidates' identities kept secret for fear of assassination.

The strengthening of Maliki's government suggests a shift towards Arab-Kurdish tension becoming a bigger factor in Iraq, instead of the alignment of Shia-Islamists with Kurdish parties in opposition to Sunni groups which has prevailed most of the time since 2003. In some recent parliamentary disputes, Maliki's Dawa has sided with opposition parties against ISCI and the Kurdish parties.

The provincial elections did not happen in the three Kurdish provinces and in Kirkuk, an area hotly disputed between Arabs and Kurds. There are many brakes

on the development of Arab-Kurdish conflict — Maliki's government includes the Kurdish parties, a Kurdish leader is president, and the most reliable units of the Iraqi army are Kurdish — but Maliki seems to want to push as far as he can to curb the Kurdistan Regional Government's quasi-independence, and its effective autonomous control over Iraqi Kurdistan's oil resources.

The relative strengthening of the Maliki government, and the step towards something like regular politics (as distinct from communal headcounting) represented by the provincial elections, have their positive side in a more assertive attitude towards the Americans.

But a stronger Maliki government is also likely to feel stronger against the Iraqi labour movement, against which it still has on the books Saddam's anti-union laws and Decree 8750 of 2005, authorising the government to confiscate union funds.

A protest in Basra by the oil union at the end of January led to the government sending in the army and arresting four union leaders to interrogate them.

The future of Iraq may now depend on a race between the Iraqi labour movement — to which the relative stabilisation gives somewhat better conditions to organise — and the "hardening" of the Maliki government. The international labour conference called in Erbil (Iraqi Kurdistan) for 13-14 March by a number of Iraqi trade unionists will be an important focus for planning how Iraqi workers can get a part in shaping the future of the country.

SEIU: GLOBAL UNION OR “BRAND NAME”?

Smoke without fire

By ADAM FINGER

In May 2006, readers of *Voice: AIGA Journal of Design* were offered an unusual glimpse into current liberal-trade union thinking.

The online publication for “the professional association for design” finds an audience largely among American commercial artists, art-directors, and “brand consultants,” an ambitious crowd unlikely to humble itself anywhere near a picket-line (except perhaps when crossing one). It is therefore revealing that contributing writer David Barringer’s “New U? Unions have an Image Problem” — the title itself a giveaway — should figure so inconspicuously as just another case study in its parent sheet.

Here we learn that US labour’s pains stem principally not from any internal malignancy or crippling neoliberal policy, but from an inability to reinvent and market itself as “The Latest Thing”.

Barringer, it must be mentioned, is no trade union insider. He is a freelance writer and graphic designer who occasionally leases his talents in the service of trade unions. His is a professional milieu accustomed to concocting public faces, in transforming the image of businesses from profit-seeking enterprises into benevolent and highly personalized organisms. So it might be forgiven, especially considering his audience, that he overlooks the floorboards and foundation and appraises the value of Andy Stern’s Service Employees International Union (SEIU), among others, purely on the strength of its “kerb appeal.”

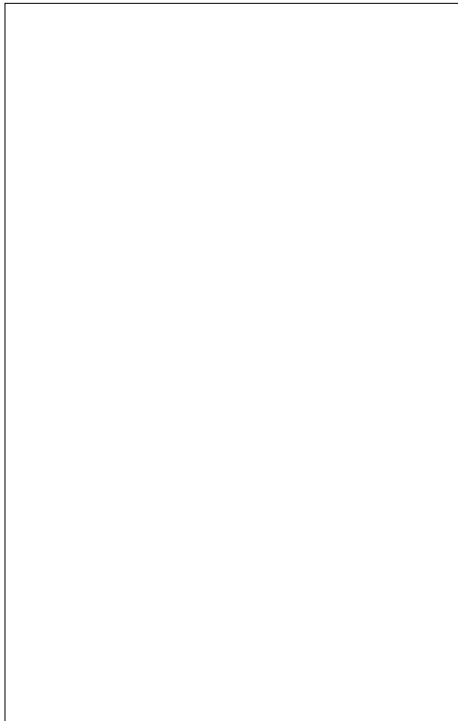
Indeed, few on the left would deny SEIU’s immediate allure. After all, since taking office in 1996, Stern has doubled the membership rolls, making the two million strong purple-clad outfit the fastest growing and most visible union in the United States. And he pledges to bring another half-million into the fold by 2012.

SEIU claims the most diverse rank and file in the nation, with women constituting a majority of membership, people of colour comprising 40%, and an immigrant constituency whose numbers are unsurpassed by any other union.

This is the same union, let us remember, whose Justice for Janitors campaign made fresh again the demand for bread, and roses too, in Ken Loach’s 2000 decennial commemoration of the “Battle of Century City.” It was Andrew L. Stern’s imprimatur which appeared on the US release of *Bread & Roses*, complete with an invocation of James Oppenheim’s plea for justice and dignity, thereby forever solidifying — at least rhetorically — a relationship between his leadership and that of the Wobbly militants who helmed the 1912 Lawrence Textile Strike. Not an easy gig, really: conjuring the memory of revolutionary unionism while promising wherever possible to shed the most basic organizing traditions of the last millennium.

But against his critics — those nostalgists who insist on (say) meaningful definitions of union democracy — he can hold this portrait up as the “Latest Thing”: a maverick organiser fighting against social injustice in a “post-industrial” world, a place where many of the old rules simply don’t apply.

Among the impediments to progress and 21st century efficiency is the bag-



UAW members rally in Los Angeles for union democracy

gage of member-chosen local leadership. As an expedient to “Getting Things Done”, that right has now become a privilege subject to reversal by the International. This was made clear when, on 23 January, the 150,000 member United Healthcare Workers-West (UHW), SEIU’s third largest local, was given the non-choice by Stern and his allegiant executive board to either accept the involuntary transfer of 65,000 nursing home and homecare workers into a statewide, 240,000 member “local” of long-term care workers, or submit to a takeover by the Washington leadership.

The members of UHW rejected this ultimatum, thus prompting Stern to place the local under emergency trusteeship on 27 January, citing financial malfeasance as reason to uproot the popular command of Sal Roselli.

According to SEIUvoice.org, a UHW member-run website, the imposition of trusteeship “has the effect of declaring martial law against those advocating for the right to vote and other democratic principles in their own union.” Even more disquieting, the International had already gone ahead and secured for itself secret offices to prepare for the takeover before the Stern-appointed hearing officer Ray Marshall came to his decision. But then why bother with formalities?

For Stern, this singular manoeuvre helped scratch a couple of nagging itches. On the one hand, it removed from power the International’s leading oppositionist, Roselli, who, once having sat on the executive board, has since roundly condemned the supposed merits of “partnership,” the trend toward employer-sanctioned bargaining agreements.

On the other hand, it helped further consolidate power into a single, regional bargaining entity designed to fulfill the mantra of “one voice,” a seemingly plausible, even ostensibly radical, artifice for the creation of these gargantuan locals.

The official reason given for the transfer of 65,000 UHW members is that “in the face of the sweeping cuts Governor Schwarzenegger has proposed, long-term care workers need to be unified now more than ever,” and that “240,000 long term care workers will stand united and stronger in one single California

local union to save state home care programs and protect nursing home funding from budget cuts.”

One Big Union, yes, but not organised against capital, but with it!

Consider some of Andy Stern’s oft-excerpted but worth repeating comments which appeared a few years ago in the 6 February 2006 issue of *Epoch Times*:

“SEIU’s goal for 2006 is to go global and to bring unions and corporations together as partners, not enemies. I think that what we’re going to see happen within ten years, if not sooner, is a convergence of a global labour movement....

“Employers need to recognise that the world has changed and there are people who would like to help them provide solutions in ways that are new, modern and that add value to companies.... A partnership between labor and corporations would be a step towards the intended goal....

“On the other side of the coin, union members have to understand that companies are not their enemy, but must think about increasing shareholder wealth....”

What was true for 2006 remains true for 2009. When the UHW long-term care workers voted against splitting, they cast their ballot as much against the joint labour-management terms with which a Stern-loyal leadership comes saddled as they did against the power-brokering and autocracy which makes such an arrangement even possible. But rather than sit idly by while the International installs its own unelected officials, the democratically-elected representatives of UHW have opted instead to form a new union, the National Union of Healthcare Workers.

Though Stern would like very much to portray this matter as the isolated clamor of deceitful “left business unionism,” other recent events suggest otherwise.

Just last October, for example, the 42,000 members of the Puerto Rican Federation of Teachers (FMPR) voted against representation by SEIU, who, in a well-financed and well-documented campaign, was found to have colluded with the island’s governor and FMPR’s rival school association to win sole bargaining control. The teacher’s own long-standing and dynamic union was decertified months earlier for authorising an illegal strike in protest over the state’s two-year refusal to grant a contract.

Rather than mobilise auxiliary support for FMPR’s newfound legal battle, SEIU

instead relished the opportunity to extend its reach, all the while assuring the local government, in no uncertain terms, of an end to the rank-and-file militancy of yore. A win-win, which, alas, was not to be.

The annals of American labour are polluted with the smoke of back-room deals and bureaucratic machinations. There is nothing novel about union-raiding or the gambits of a power-hungry officialdom. But there is something unique about the ways in which these tactics are now packaged and resold as a panacea for labour’s woes.

It is a kind of retailing which assumes a market already saturated with the obscurantism of social theorists who insist that industrialism and tidy class divisions are relics of a prehistoric past. And its hucksters are always quick to assure us that the hyper-efficiency of corporate restructuring precludes the paralysing romanticism of rank and file accountability that union democracy would otherwise demand.

Since rank-and-file self-activity can only ever unravel “partnership” arrangements, Andy Stern must increasingly turn outward for continued support. To this end, he has pursued the same course of aggressive face-painting that are his business allies’ stock in trade, blanketing a bullied membership in a precisely stitched pattern of Facts and Figures. Perhaps in this sense “brand unionism” might come to best express the practices of his SEIU.

There is, however, a neat irony to branding. It is a point usually lost on left-wing critics of consumerism (many of whom also helped deliver us into “post-industrial” society), but not on the late American dissident Ellen Willis, who long ago discovered that with each new purported nonessential comes the very real, albeit limited, satisfaction of certain human desires and the promise of a materially-rich future. The biggest threat to capital isn’t that workers should suddenly stop consuming (capital periodically takes care of that, in its own way); it is that workers should demand the conditions which might allow them to take the ad-men up on their offers of an abundant life.

Likewise, the biggest threat to SEIU’s brand of top-down unionism is that more members should follow the lead of UHW and FMPR rank and filers and insist Andy Stern’s pledge of social-justice be taken to its logical conclusion — confrontation, rather than adaptation, to the status quo.

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UK UNIONS

Trade unions and neoliberalism

Elliott Robinson reviews *Trade Unions in a Neoliberal World: British Trade Unions under New Labour*, Gary Daniels and John McIlroy (eds), Routledge

“The trade union is not a predetermined institution, i.e. it takes on a definite historical form to the extent that the strength and will of the workers who are its members impress a policy and propose an aim that define it.” Antonio Gramsci, *Unions and Councils*, 12 June 1920

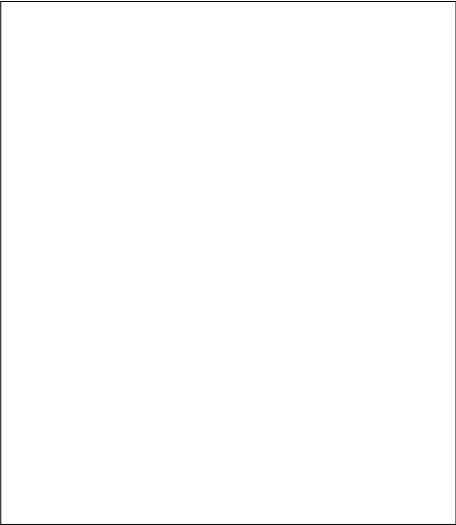
“If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favourable”. Seneca

The impact of neoliberalism on the British labour movement is the subject of this new book. It is an encyclopedic compendium of key information about the last decade of trade unionism in the UK. To this it adds provocative and in places incisive interpretation. It faces squarely the reality of the trade unionism today, buffeted by neoliberalism. However it does not shy away from criticism of union leaderships, their politics and strategy. It provides a useful foundation to assess the recent period in labour movement history, on the cusp of an economic slump.

Neoliberalism is latest stage of capitalism and the dominant ideology since the late 1970s. The Thatcherite state introduced the neoliberal restructuring regime of privatisation, deregulation and marketisation, recasting the role and place of the UK within the global capitalist economy. This restructuring has continued and expanded under New Labour.

For the labour movement neoliberalism has meant the imposition of anti-union legislation, restricting and criminalising much of trade union activity. The role of unions in this regime is at best to act as “subaltern allies” of business and the state in managing the labour market.

Between 1979 and 1997 employment in the UK grew by 20%, from 26.9m to 31.5m. In the decade after 1997 the number of jobs grew by almost 12%. But over the whole period employment patterns changed dramatically. Jobs in manufac-



Gate Gourmet strike, one of a number of important but defeated disputes

turing fell by more than half to 3.2m; in energy and water the decline was over three quarters. But jobs in finance and business services doubled to 6.6m; education, health and public administration also grew by 50%.

Overall trade union membership in the UK fell from an historic high point of 13.5 million members in 1979 to 7.8 million in 1997. In 2006 it stood at 7.6 million. Membership of TUC-affiliated union fell over that period from 12m to 6.7m to 6.4m. (It was 6.5m in 2008) A number of large individual unions have continued to lose membership over the past decade, although others have expanded. (See table 1)

Union density (membership as a percentage of total employees) fell from an historic high of 55% in 1979 to 31% in 1997. By 2006 it had fallen to 28%. Private sector density fell from 20% in 1997 to 17% in 2006. Public sector density fell from 61% in 1997 to 59% in 2006.

The proportion of workplaces with a trade union representative fell from 17% in 1997 to 13% in 2006. Two-thirds (64%) of workplaces have no union members at all. Only 18% of workplaces have a majority of trade union members. The average age of a trade unionist is currently 46. Workplace organisation was substantially weakened by Thatcherism. But there has been “no revitalisation of workplace trade unionism” since 1997.

Under New Labour “workplace organisations remain decisively debilitated” and overall unions “no longer negotiate to any significant extent”.

The annual number of strikes has “declined remorselessly” since the peak in 1968-74. The annual number of strikes fell from around 2,000 in 1979 to about 200 through the 1990s. It decreased further in the 2000s, approaching a minimal level. This partly reflected the “tertiarisation” of work in Europe and North America, whereby strikes more directly affect service users or customers. (See table 2)

There have been few high points in industrial action under New Labour. In July 2002, a public sector strike was probably the largest industrial action involving women workers in British history. In September 2002 the ISTC took the first industrial action to defend a final salary pension scheme. There have also been a large number of unofficial strikes in Royal Mail, as well as safety strikes and no revenue days on the rail.

However a number of key disputes have resulted in setbacks and defeats. The FBU dispute in 2002-03 was settled a long way short of the £30k demanded. The CWU dispute in 2007 ended with modernisation and a paltry pay settlement. Over 800 Gate Gourmet workers who came out on unofficial strike in 2005 were sacked, with only a third reinstated. Threatened strikes over pensions in the civil service, schools and the NHS were called off for a two-tier deal. Another measure is the union “mark-up” on wages, which fell from 14% in 1993 to 6% in 2000.

PARTNERSHIP

Partnership has been the device New Labour adapted to develop a neoliberal trade union movement. For union leaders, partnership meant stakeholding and social dialogue on the European model. But for New Labour partnership meant unions were no longer indispensable intermediaries between employers and workers, unless they renounced class conflict and participated in the drive to increase productivity and profits. Some 220 formal partnership agreements have been enacted to shackle militancy.

Since 1997 unions have received huge state subsidies for doing the bidding of neoliberalism. Money for partnerships, for workplace learning, for training, for “modernisation” and for international work have helped to make unions to some extent the “prisoners and pensioners” of the neoliberal state.

As union membership has declined and union finances squeezed, mergers have altered the landscape of trade unionism in the UK. In 1979 there were 453 unions; by 1997 it had fallen to 245. In 1997 the TUC had 74 affiliated unions; by 2008 it was 59. Although some mergers have taken place within sectors, the

dominant pattern has been the “augmentation of conglomerates” as against the development of industrial unions.

A new generation of union leaders elected since 1997 pledged to be more assertive industrially and more left-wing politically than their predecessors. However the so-called awkward squad are not an homogenous group and their record has rarely borne out these promises. Taken together, they have “posed no fundamental political threat, still less a coherent political alternative to neoliberalism”.

The turn to organising has removed mainly the rhetoric rather than the substance of partnership. Top-down managed activism has made some membership gains and won some recognition battles. Of the 566 cases referred to the CAC for union recognition since 2000, 333 were accepted, 74 got recognition without a ballot. But of the 143 ballots, only 88 were successful. Despite some 220 graduates from the TUC’s Organising Academy and more emphasis on officials recruiting rather than servicing existing members, the embrace of “organising” has not turned the tide in membership decline.

Overarching these processes has been the decline in working class political representation. By 1997 neoliberalism had made substantial inroads into the labour movement, principally within the Labour Party leadership and sections of the trade union bureaucracy. Since then they have successively introduced measures to disenfranchise the working class from politics, walling off the government from the Labour Party and hollowing out democratic channels within the party, and between the party and the unions. In 2006, 16 unions affiliated 2.6m members to the Labour Party, down from the 23 unions that affiliated 3.2m members in 1997. Nearly two-thirds of trade unionists are not affiliated.

Although unions have continued to provide funding, the book catalogues how they have successively lost control and influence over the party’s decision making. It concludes that the link may well endure in the absence of better alternatives and the “cigarette-paper” differences with the Tories. However it does not quite draw the conclusion that flows from the rest of the analysis: that the relationship has been transformed beyond recognition.

Trade unions suffered 17 years of continuous decline in the early phase of neoliberalism. But no significant revitalisation has taken place in the first decade of New Labour, despite economic growth and higher levels of employment. With the onset of the economic downturn, unions face a major struggle even to consolidate. To turn the situation around, the first prerequisite is to break from neoliberalism and reforge independent working class politics on all three fronts of the class struggle.

Table 1			
Union	Membership in 2008	Major mergers since 1997	Membership in 1997
Unite	1,952,510	TGWU 896,550 AEEU 725,743 MSF 466,000 GPMU 216,991 BIFU 123,540 Unifi 47,606	2,456,430
Unison	1,344,000		1,355,313
GMB	590,056		740,319
USDAW	356,291		283,255
PCS	304,829	PTC 151,175 CPSA 121,749	272,924
NUT	282,589		175,127
NASUWT	265,202		157,146
CWU	236,697		275,055
UCATT	129,065		106,558
UCU	117,028	NATFHE 70,477 AUT 35,458	105,935
Prospect	102,702	IPMS 78,652 EMA 31,197	109,849
RMT	75,906		59,250
Community	67,488	ISTC 55,100 KFAT 45,137	100,237
FBU	45,410		54,407
NUJ	32,409		21,873

Table 2			
Period	Strikes	Workers involved	Working days lost
1968-1974	2,846	1,684,000	11,703,000
1975-1979	2,310	1,658,000	11,663,000
1980-1984	1,351	1,298,000	10,486,000
1985-1990	838	702,000	3,600,000
1991-1996	244	226,000	656,000
1997-2001	192	145,000	357,000
2002-2006	134	438,000	728,000

Pakistan under the PPP

Faryal Velmi visited Karachi, Pakistan in December 2008. In the first of two articles about Pakistan's politics and history she describes the events leading up to the change of government in Pakistan and her conversations with Pakistani socialists about the prospects for political change under the new Pakistan People's Party government.

Driving from the airport through the streets of Karachi, the first thing that catches your eye are huge billboards depicting the assassinated former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto; a garish reminder of another bloody chapter in the country's short history.

Bhutto's return from self-imposed exile and her violent death in December 2007 unleashed a hurricane of protests and riots across the country. Subsequent elections in February 2008 saw the Pakistan People's Party, led by Bhutto's husband Asif Ali Zardari, sweep to power, finally dislodging General Pervez Musharraf from his 11 year dictatorship.

The roulette wheel of Pakistani politics had been spun again, yet another military dictatorship being replaced by a civilian government promising democratic change.

Musharraf's "bloodless coup" against the government of Nawaz Sharif in October 1999 saw him become Pakistan's fourth self-appointed military ruler in the country's 62 year history.

At first Musharaff claimed to be cut from a different khaki cloth to other military rulers. He talked about Pakistan practising an Islam of "enlightened moderation". His televised speeches talked about ending the decades of government corruption and nepotism of successive Pakistani governments. Asif Ali Zardari was arrested and put in prison on corruption charges.

The leaders of the main political parties Benazir Bhutto (Pakistani Peoples Party), Nawaz Sharif (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz) and Altaf Hussein (Muttahida Qaumi Movement) all sloped off to foreign exiles, to pull the strings of their party machines from London and Dubai.

Governmental control of the media relaxed and numerous independent TV channels sprung up — a new era of reporting, political debate and satire began.

But Musharaff also wanted a means to secure his position at home and abroad. The invasion of Afghanistan by the US after 9/11 was a golden opportunity for that. What followed was to eventually lead to Musharraf's demise.

Musharraf ordered the military and Pakistan's extensive "intelligence" apparatus to conduct a spectacular u-turn. The Taliban and jihadist groups who had been supported and aided by Pakistan for decades were now declared the enemy.

Full support was given to the US. Pakistani nationals suspected by the CIA of supporting the Taliban were picked up by Pakistani authorities and made to disappear.

In return Musharaff secured millions of dollars of aid from the US, some used

to maintain the country's nuclear arsenal. However elements within the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the military who had worked closely with the Taliban and their predecessors and shared their worldview could not stomach the about turn. Many have never forgiven Musharraf for this betrayal — as a number of "inside-job" attempted assassinations of Musharaff are evidence of.

Musharraf's love of money and accumulation of wealth equalled and even surpassed that of Bhutto and Sharif.

The military, initially through foundations set up to provide welfare and perks to army personnel, created business empires with a huge industrial, commercial and real-estate portfolios amounting to almost £5 billion.

As the Commander in Chief Musharraf had almost direct control of these networks.

The Fauji Foundation, nominally an ex-service welfare organisation, is Pakistan's largest capitalist operation, a huge sprawling empire involved in everything from shoes to the fertiliser industry.

While the khaki capitalists amassed wealth, workers' rights were stamped on. Musharraf banned all trade unions and put heavy restrictions on the right to protest.

In 2007, fifty years after the creation of Pakistan, 75% (122 million) of the population lived on \$2 a day, and 15% (30million) living on \$1 a day. 40% of the population have no access to safe drinking water, and 50% no access to sanitation.

Unwilling to deal with the dire poverty and vicious inequality, and unable to live with the consequences, the General began to ditch his quasi-democrat stance. His popularity nose-dived and a number of events led to his eventual downfall.

One was the botched military operation in 2007 at the Red Mosque in the heart of the capital Islamabad.

The mosque had been taken over by a hardline Muslim cleric called Abdul Rashid Ghazi. Along with hundreds of men and women supporters they had turned it into a fortress. Burhka clad women brandishing sticks launched an aggressive campaign to impose Sharia law in the areas. They raided people's homes and burned down video shops, eventually taking two Chinese women hostage and accusing them of being prostitutes. For months Musharaff and the police did nothing.

When they finally raided the mosque 100 people were killed.

The Taliban threatened revenge, and the bombing of the Islamabad Marriott hotel in September 2008 could well have been them taking revenge.

Musharraf's continued support for the war on terror had resulted in US drones bombing the semi autonomous Waziristan region in the north — evoking the wrath of local tribal leaders. If the Taliban and their fellow travellers were hiding in the area they were now getting a huge recruitment drive.

A rushed privatisation of the Pakistani steel mill was also widely reviled. Estimated to be worth £5 billion, it was sold in an auction at a fraction of the

Mr 10% — Asif Ali Zardari of the Pakistan People's Party (left)

value (about £370 million) to a shady consortium with links to Musharraf's stooge Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz. It is said the mill, with all of its materials and machinery, could have fetched more as scrap.

The Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, vehemently opposed the deal, increasingly became a thorn in the Musharaff regime's side.

Without any sense of irony, Musharraf accused the Chief Justice of nepotism and ordered that he be removed from office in March 2007.

Musharaff could never have predicted the response.

Thousands of lawyers dressed in black and white took to the streets, shutting down courts and paralysing the country. Never before in the history of Pakistan had the judiciary and legal community broken ranks with the government or rulers of the day.

The sheer force of the movement was used by both the PPP and the Muslim League (Nawaz) for their own purposes. Bhutto and the PPP were forced to support the protestors and their demands. But Zardari — who spent nearly all of the Musharaff years in prison — was never inclined to re-instate the very same judiciary who kept him there.

The Muslim League and Nawaz Sharif have gained support by sticking to their guns and continuing to support the reinstatement of the Chief Justice and the other judges removed by Musharaff. But as a minority coalition partner in the current government they have little sway.

Pakistan's main socialist group, the Labour Party Pakistan, participated at every level of the mass movement, agitating and organising and linking the demand for the re-instatement of the

Chief Justice with passionate chants of "Go Musharraf Go".

The General became desperate and turned to his old enemies, Bhutto and Zardari, even after spending millions of dollars pursuing corruption cases across the world against them.

A power sharing deal was signed with Bhutto and the PPP. A "National Reconciliation Ordinance" was signed and the slate was wiped clean. All court cases were stopped and an amnesty issued. Bhutto, whose diatribe against military dictators filled the airwaves of talk shows across the world, returned to Pakistan to become a "democratic fig leaf" Prime Minister.

But after Bhutto's assassination Musharaff could not survive. The PPP leadership was like a family heirloom, passed down to Bhutto's son Bilawal Zardari. His father, the notorious "Mr 10%" became President, free now to add to the tens of millions of dollars he has already looted from the country.

SOCIALIST ALTERNATIVE

It is hard to see how a socialist working-class alternative can take shape and grow, amidst the cabal of corrupt politicians, military dictators and Islamist extremists. But if there is to be any chance of building a working class alternative than the Labour Party of Pakistan will be at the heart of it.

Currently the largest socialist group in the country with thousands of members, it has taken sharp positions against both the corrupt bourgeois politicians, feudal landlords and the Islamists.

While in Pakistan I spoke to Farooq Tariq, the LPP's secretary. I asked him about the Bhutto billboards — a feature



Everywhere you go there are billboards with Bhutto’s image and political rhetoric. But how long can the PPP hold on?

in every major city in the country.

“The only thing the new government has done in eight months is congratulate themselves and loot with both hands”.

As Farooq explains this is at a time of a hike in the prices of basic food items and constant electricity blackouts.

The PPP government has raised the minimum wage to 6000 rupees a month (£55), but with no governmental enforcement this is an empty gesture.

All of Musharaff’s anti-trade union laws have been kept on the statute books. A rushed Industrial Relations Act (2008) also banned all public sector workers from joining a trade union. Individual contracts between employers and bosses are being introduced in some industries.

The LPP has spearheaded campaigns to fight attempts to privatise the small number of remaining utilities that Musharaff could not get his hands on. The privatisation of the Kaudarpur Gas field was stopped by a wave of impressive strikes and demonstrations by gas workers in late 2008.

The political network which backed Musharaff remains intact, especially in Karachi.

The lawyers’ movement had a violent detour when the deposed Chief Justice and his thousands of supporters attempted to march in Karachi last year. Musharaff-backing MQM assert huge control over the city, holding the position of City Mayor; they have a web of mafia style networks. The party leadership had stuck by Musharaff and been well rewarded for it. They could not allow an opposition march through what they see as their city.

When the movement arrived in the city the MQM and its armed supporters were given free reign by the police to disrupt and stop the march. Running gun battles took place with lawyers’ movement people and bystanders were shot at. Forty were killed in the violence and the MQM widely blamed.

While I am in Karachi more violence linked to the MQM occurs, and sectarian violence shuts down the city. MQM supporters have been accusing the thousands of Pashtuns who have arrived in the city looking for work of spreading “Talibanism” or worse still being the Taliban.

Examples are cited of girls not being allowed to attend schools in Pashtun majority parts of the city. The Pashtun

community strenuously denies these accusations; they say that ethnic discrimination against them is rife.

Karachi is a sprawling metropolis of 16 million people and its population is growing. It is hard to see Karachiites with their love of American fast food, Bollywood films and late night amorous strolls on the “sea view” beach, could ever fall under the sway of the mullahs. But perhaps one could have said the same thing about Tehran and Kabul.

Nevertheless the frenzied murders, beatings and ransacking of Pashtun owned shops that left a dozen dead in three days of sectarian violence between Pashtuns and their Urdu-speaking Mujahir neighbours is sickening. And the MQM are accused of whipping up hysteria.

Farooq is scathing. “This is nothing but ethnic cleansing conducted by the MQM. If they were serious about fighting Talibanisation then they would nationalise the madrassas [religious schools where poverty stricken families deposit their sons for free food, shelter and indoctrination] and challenge discriminatory laws like the hudood ordinance [a sharia statute introduced by Islamising dictator Zia-ul-Haq in 1979, which among other things has led to many rape victims being punished for adultery, in some cases with death]. They have done nothing.”

I want to find out what other socialists think about the situation in Karachi and the country as a whole. So I visit the LPP’s Karachi office in the bustling Hassan Square district of the city.

There I meet with Zehra, Shabaz, Azra and other comrades, and we speak for an hour about everything from the Mumbai terror attacks to the lawyers’ movement. Their thoughts are that the attacks will strengthen the right wing in both India and Pakistan.

We discuss the news that Zardari was apparently hoax-called by someone claiming to be the Indian foreign minster who told him that India was preparing an imminent military attack in retaliation for alleged Pakistani involvement in the attacks. He convened an emergency meeting at 2am only to be told from the Indian foreign ministry that no call had been made.

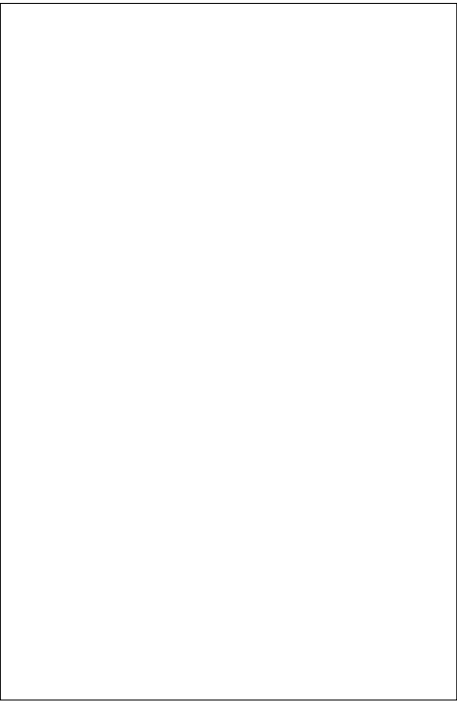
But when our conversation turns to the lawyers’ movement the LPP members’ eyes light up. These Karachi comrades have been heavily involved with the

movement and they say it has had a profound effect on everyone that participated — showing them that a secular movement with progressive aims could attract mass support.

I also learn about a number of projects the LPP are leading on — work which is about sharpening the class-consciousness of working-class people and providing basic education and information. On International Women’s Day and May Day the LPP have organised marches of thousands of people. The Labour Education Foundation organises study circles, and the Women Workers’ Help Line provides women with access to legal information and helps resolve-workplace issues.

WOMEN

We speak at length about the discrimination Pakistani women face at every level of society, the problem of loud and vociferous Islamists and their legions of supporters. Zehra says, “The Jamaat e-Islami [longstanding mainstream Islamists] barge into people’s houses and accuse them of being un-Islamic. The mullahs always start and end with women. They are obsessed with women!”



Pervez Musharraf, responsible for his own demise

The situation has become grave in the Swat valley area of Pakistan. Once described as the Switzerland of Pakistan, it has been taken over by Taliban-supporting extremists under the leadership of Mulana Fazlullah. Women and young girls have been the main victims. Hundreds of girls’ schools have been burned down; women who are accused of breaking their misogynistic morality code are having their noses cut off.

The actions of the Pakistani military and the ISI in Afghanistan, sponsoring the Taliban, are coming back to haunt the country. Women’s rights in Pakistan are very fragile and easily trampled on.

The military are involved in a futile attempt to dislodge the Islamists but have failed. The Zardari government is unable and unwilling to tackle the situation. It lives too far away from the lives of ordinary people, in a wealthy air-conditioned existence.

All of this makes the work of the LPP and the initiatives like the Women Workers’ Help Line even more important. These young, bright and passionate comrades leave me with hope for Pakistan.

On my return journey back to the airport and the UK I spot another billboard. This one again depicts Bhutto. Her hands are turned towards the heavens in prayer and her famous quote, “Democracy is the best revenge” is emblazoned underneath.

Of course, she betrayed that promise. But for the LPP and other socialists, trade unionists and feminists struggling in Pakistan today, revenge will come in the form of genuine democracy, a mass movement for workers’ democracy that can offer an alternative for the future.

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STUDENT ACTION ON GAZA

Linking the occupations

As *Solidarity* went to press, students at the University of East Anglia, Edinburgh University and Goldsmiths College in London had just gone into occupation in solidarity with Gaza — bringing the total number of colleges that have now occupied to 29. Koos Cuvée reports from the meeting to coordinate the occupations called by the Stop the War Coalition on 7 February.

The meeting started with a number of high profile speakers. Jeremy Corbyn praised the student movement rising again after years of apathy. Students involved in the LSE and Manchester occupations spoke about the disgraceful attitude of NUS towards the movement, and the possibility of it broadening out to cover other issues like anti-fascism and free education. Lindsey German of the SWP made a predictable analogy between the situation in South Africa in the 1970s and Palestine now and spoke in favour of a boycott of Israel. Tony Benn also spoke. The general tone of the meeting was celebratory.

A bit of debate arose around the boycott issue, when a member of the Socialist Party argued a boycott would hurt the Israeli working class most, and inhibited united action for socialism in the Middle East. The majority of the room was heavily in favour of a boycott. This was the end of the debate, and it did not resurface. Interestingly, the student charter that the StWC drew up for their local factions did *not* include the boycott demand.

After the reports back from the various occupations, the final session again included a number of speakers — Chris Nineham from StWC and the SWP, George Galloway MP, and Rob Owen, NUS Executive member and SWP activist. Nineham broadened the emphasis on Gaza to imperialism worldwide, and stressed the importance of the demos around the G20 and NATO. Galloway tried to rally support for his Gaza aid convoy.

After the conference many delegates felt quite dissatisfied, despite the general tone of the meeting being constructive and celebratory. It seemed to me that a lot of the socialist/libertarian/unaffiliated delegates wanted to network and share skills, which the confer-

ence did not cater for.

Apart from this there was the call from Revo/Workers Power for the “radical coordination of student struggles”. Then of course there is Education Not for Sale’s call for a new student union network alongside NUS (a lot of frustration about the NUS was voiced in the meeting), and the planned meeting to discuss this idea on 7 March. We joined forces and called for a meeting at ULU after the conference. We were joined by 40-50 delegates, and the SWP turned up to it as well.

Because of the various intentions behind this spontaneous meeting its aims were quite unclear, but I think there were a number of elements to it. People wanted to have a general discussion about this occupation movement and its relation to broader politics and student struggles. Some people did not want to network and organise through the bureaucracy of the StWC, and were opposed to the creation of a national committee, something that was proposed and voted through on conference floor earlier. Other questions were on how this movement related to NUS and could foster involvement in the “new centre”, as well as how it related to various existing broad left student initiatives.

SWP comrades tried to block this discussion, arguing for national coordination through the structures they control (STW, the Another Education is Possible group). The legitimacy of people in the room was questioned by Rob Owen, saying he didn’t feel “the meeting reflected the leadership of the occupations”, which pissed a lot of delegates (especially those who are on principle opposed to the idea of leadership) right off. By this time the SWP, except for Rob, had all walked out. With numbers dwindling we decided to set a date for for a national meeting (provisionally Saturday 18 April), and we agreed that our struggles should be linked up through the creation of an email list and regular meetings.

Whether the SWP is up for building for a new conference on April 18 remains to be seen. By that time, the Nato and G20 demonstrations, as well as the 25 February demonstration for free education, will be behind us, and we will need a national network to continue our various struggles, especially over fees.

• For more information email kc69@sussex.ac.uk

Defend Yahya Al-Faifia

Yahya Al-Faifi was persecuted for organising a trade union at BAE Systems in Saudir Arabia, a state where all serious oppositionists are rounded up, tortured, imprisoned and denied a fair trial. Very few people have dared organise trade unions in Saudi Arabia. Yahya Al-Faifi is an exceptionally courageous man.

Yahya Al-Faifi was forced to flee to Britain in 2004 with some of his family. He settled in south Wales and continued his union work with the Communications Workers Union. He has continued to highlight the oppression trade unionists face in Saudi Arabia.

He now faces deportation from the UK. The Home Office has refused the application for refugee status for Yahya, his wife and his children.

He urgently needs the support of all trade unionists

and socialists to stay here.

His campaign are asking people to contact MPs ask them to put pressure on the Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith MP.

They are also asking people to email or write to Jacqui Smith and register their support for Yahya Al-Faifi and his family to stay in the UK:

jacqui.smith@homeoffice.gov.uk

If anyone has any means to get trade unions or trade union representatives to intervene on Yahya’s behalf please do so.

• Email the campaign here:
defendyahyaalfaiifi@googlemail.com

• Interview with Yahya:
www.workersliberty.org/node/5101

Demonstrate against fees — for free education!

National student demo, London, Wednesday 25 February 2009

Meet 12 noon outside University of London, Malet Street, WC1E (Russell Square, Euston or Goodge Street tube)

• For more information, including the full supporters list, or for publicity email studentdemo2009@gmail.com and visit www.studentdemo2009.org.uk

Jill Mountford will be standing as a socialist candidate in Harriet Harman’s constituency, Camberwell and Peckham.

• Public meeting: Monday 23 February 7pm, Wishing Well pub, Choumert Road, Peckham
• Weekend of action: Saturday 21 and Sunday 22 February, meeting both days at 12 noon at Peckham Rye station

WORKERS’ LIBERTY FUND DRIVE

Thanks are due to the following people in the last fortnight, for helping towards our £18,000 target: Mark and Lawrence for taking out and increasing standing orders, Ed for the £50 donation. South West London branch raised £28 and we received new subs worth £32. A total of £310 for the last two weeks.

Can you help us? Take out a standing order. Donate via our website or by post. Take some copies of *Solidarity* to sell. Join the AWL. Email us at awl@workersliberty.org or call 020 207 3997.

Fund total £7,109

EVENTS, DATES, PUBLIC MEETINGS

For more information and downloadable leaflets see www.workersliberty.org/whatson

AWL London study group on the history of British Trotskyism: 7.30pm, second and fourth Thursdays of the month, London N1: phone 07950 978 083 for details

Protest against Heathrow Third runway called by Campaign Against Climate Change: 5.30pm, Thursday 19 February, Downing St, London.

Socialist Feminist Discussion Group: 7.30pm, Friday 20 February. The life and politics of Sylvia Pankhurst.

SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1.

AWL dayschool on workers’ government: 12noon, Saturday 21 February, Sheffield University Student Union.

What should the LGBT and trade unionists’ position be on sex work (if any)? 7pm, Monday 23 February, Stockwell Community Resource Centre, Studley Street, SW4. www.lambethtuc.org.uk

Do you remember the Wapping dispute? 6.30pm, Toynbee Hall, 28 Commercial Street, London, E1 6LS.

National student demonstration against fees, for grants, for free education: Wednesday 25 February, 12 noon. Assemble outside ULU, Malet Street, London WC1

“Why capitalism is in crisis and what we can do about it”: AWL youth and trade union dayschool, Saturday 21 March, SOAS, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1. Email awl@workersliberty.org for more details

AWL summer school 2009: Friday-Sunday 10-12 July, London

Who is Ken Livingstone's hero?

BY SINEAD ASCH

There is a Radio Four programme, *Great Lives*, in which prominent people nominate their “hero” and then discuss the hero with an “expert” — usually the hero’s biographer — with the one-time Tory MP Matthew Parris chairing the discussion. Last week Ken Livingstone — former Mayor and future Lord Red Ken — nominated his hero. Guess who? Livingstone once contributed an introduction to a hagiography of Gerry Healy, the “Trotskyist” who sold himself and the organisation he controlled, the Workers’ Revolutionary Party, to Arab governments. Here was a chance to bring the good sides and the good memories of the late, not much lamented, and still much-execrated Healy to a wide audience.

But no. Livingstone’s “hero” is not, after all, the unprincipled little scumbag Healy. His hero is... Robert Kennedy!

Kennedy was the younger brother and hatchet-man for US president John F Kennedy, who was assassinated in November 1963. With the Kennedys it was always a triumph of style over substance.

Kennedy was not much of a president in terms of things done — his vice-president Lyndon Johnson, when he became president on Kennedy’s assassination, did a great deal more. Like George W Bush, Kennedy didn’t become president honestly. He beat Richard Nixon by cheating on votes, organised for him by his rich father Joe Kennedy and the mafia.

Robert Kennedy became his brother’s Attorney General. He had been one of the lawyers for the demagogic red-hunter Senator Joe McCarthy, and was decidedly on the right of politics.

What did Ken Livingstone admire in him? After his ejection from office when Johnson became president, Robert Kennedy went through a crisis, including a crisis of his once-fervent Catholicism, and re-thought a few things. He re-emerged in mainstream politics as a liberal.

It was this move from doctrinaire right-wing certainties to a more pragmatic, more humane, and more human approach to politics that the one-time “Red Ken” admired. He saw himself in it, he confided.

“Thirty years ago” he had “dogmatically” believed in a completely socialist economy. Experience had enlightened him, as it had Robert Kennedy. In other words, the future Lord Red Ken’s hero remains Ken and those in whose lives he sees a flattering reflection of his marvellous self.

In 1968, Robert Kennedy jumped on an anti Vietnam war, anti Johnson bandwagon set moving by Eugene McCarthy, and was assassinated by a young Arab in the course of his campaign. Good career move: now people so minded, like the political squeezed-lemon Ken Livingstone, the once upon a time Red Ken, can see Kennedy as a lost leader, the foully murdered liberal US president that never was.

FILM

A man for all the oppressed

GULED JAMA MOHAMED REVIEWS MILK

This is a biographical film based on the life of Harvey Milk, a 70s gay activist and the first openly gay man to be elected to office in California, as a member of the San Francisco board of supervisors.

The opening credits of the film show archive footage of police raiding gay bars in the 50s and 60s. Harvey Milk (played by Sean Penn) is seen recording his will in the opening scene. He fears assassination in the run-up to a crucial point in the recognition of gay rights in America.

The emotive theme of danger and persecution runs throughout the film, showing flashbacks to significant periods in Milk’s political and private life. It sets the context in which Milk’s political activity should be considered; this was a period when homosexuality was outlawed by legislation and gay people were routinely subjected to police brutality and imprisonment for being honest about who they were.

Milk’s political life started when he was in his early 40s and he moved to San Francisco with his lover. Like many other gay men at the time, he was hoping to find

more acceptance. San Francisco was already home to a significant gay minority made up of men who had been expelled from the military.

Having set up a business (Castro Cameras) in The Castro — at the time a predominantly working-class Irish-Catholic area — Milk and his lover Scott Smith (James Franco) quickly become frustrated with the bigotry they encounter. The film shows how Milk worked to build networks of solidarity, at first with gay businesses and their customers but then also with trade unionists and the black community who were facing their own struggles at the time.

One element that comes across strikingly in the film is in the way that Harvey Milk strove to tackle bigotry, racism and corruption head-on from whichever angle it came. He is shown as championing the rights of all the oppressed and having gained much support for his bold campaigns. The film shows the lead up to his election and the following successful campaign to defeat the repeal of a national gay rights ordinance.

Harvey Milk was assassinated by an embittered fellow supervisor on 27 November 1978, at the age of 48.

This is an inspiring film about an inspiring individual. I’d give it five stars.

BOOK

Sex and corruption

CATHY NUGENT REVIEWS THE GIRL WHO PLAYED WITH FIRE BY STIEG LARSSON (2009)

This is a detective story set in Sweden. But please don’t let me put you off. This is not just another detective story set in Sweden. It is the second of Stieg Larsson’s “Millennium Trilogy” and like both of the so far UK-published volumes deals with some big themes. Here it is the sexual repression of Swedish public life. Is this the “liberal” Swedes we are talking about? Yep.

The “girl” of the title is super-intelligent, serially abused, and thus chronically angry, computer hacker Lisbeth Salander. In this book, helped by her ally campaigning journalist Mikael Blomquist, she breaks up a gang of sex traffickers.

The book is an uneasy mix of supportive but critical

examination of the Swedish sex industry laws. An interesting theme then, as the British government prepares to introduce laws based on the Swedish model — including criminalising “punters” and increasing crackdowns on of brothels (which will make the lives of sex workers more dangerous).

Larsson was a left-winger, a world famous anti-facist in fact (he died in 2004). He clearly broadly supported Sweden’s laws. Yet he does point to a danger inherent in a system of legislation which is all about repressing the sex industry; abolition and prohibition tends to drive the banned thing underground. That makes black markets and in turn creates opportunities for profiteers and for people with power — politicians and police to become corrupted. This is theme of Larsson’s book.

Whatever the politics this is a great read, especially for its wonderful, original heroine who has, for all her crack self-defence skills, a heart-breaking vulnerability.

WILLIAM MORRIS

Ecology and the shift to socialism

THE SIXTH PART OF A SERIES BY PAUL HAMPTON

Sometime in 1882, William Morris decided he was no longer a radical and began to associate himself explicitly with socialism. He stated in *How I Became A Socialist* (16 June 1894) that by the summer of 1882 he was ready “to join any body who distinctly called themselves Socialists.” (Edward Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 1976)

In January 1883 Morris joined the Democratic Federation and began his agitation for socialism — a commitment that he would maintain to his death. He continued to be a dedicated conservationist. In his celebrated lecture ‘Art under Plutocracy’, delivered at the Russell Club at Oxford University in November 1883, at which he unashamedly urged the audience to join the socialist cause, Morris repeated some of his earlier themes.

He said: “I can myself sympathise with a feeling which I suppose is still not rare, a craving to escape sometimes to mere Nature... I can deeply sympathise with a weary man finding his account in interest in mere life and communion with external nature, the face of the country, the wind and weather, and the course of the day, and the lives of animals, wild and domestic; and man’s daily dealings with all this for his daily bread, and rest, and innocent beast-like pleasure.” (A L Morton, *Political Writings of William Morris*)

In ‘Under an Elm-Tree; or, Thoughts in the Country-Side’, published in *Commonweal* (6 July 1889), he described his joy at the countryside: “Midsummer in the country — here you may walk between the fields and hedges that are as it were one huge nosegay for you, redolent of bean-flowers and clover and sweet hay and elder-blossom. The cottage gardens are bright with flowers, the cottages themselves mostly models of architecture in their way. Above them towers here and there the architecture proper of days bygone, when every craftsman was an artist and brought definite intelligence to bear upon his work.

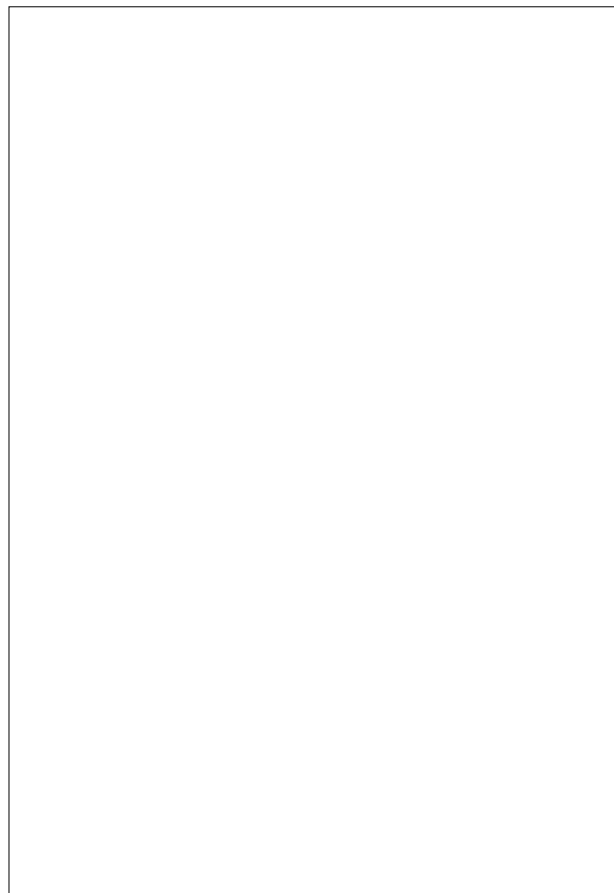
“Man in the past, nature in the present, seem to be bent on pleasing you and making all things delightful to your senses; even the burning dusty road has a look of luxury as you lie on the strip of roadside green, and listen to the blackbirds singing, surely for your benefit, and, I was going to say as if they were paid to do it, but I was wrong, for as it is they seem to be doing their best.

“And all, or let us say most things, are brilliantly alive. The shadowy bleak in the river down yonder, which is — ignorant of the fate that Barking Reach is preparing for its waters — sapphire blue under this ruffling wind and cloudless sky, and barred across here and there with the pearly white-flowered water-weeds, every yard of its banks a treasure of delicate design, meadowsweet and dewberry and comfrey and bed-straw — from the bleak in the river, amongst the labyrinth of grasses, to the starlings busy in the new shorn fields, or about the grey ridges of the hay, all is eager, and I think all is happy that is not anxious.”

In *News from Nowhere*, he has Ellen express his what he would later call his “deep love of the earth and the life on it”: “O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it, — as this has done!”

However I would argue that his conversion to socialism developed his ecological politics in a number of significant respects. In particular Morris developed a more sophisticated conception of the relationship between nature and human society, a more adequate explanation for the causes of ecological degradation, a notion that the working class could become the vital social agency in ecological as well as wider politics and a positive conception of socialism as a more ecologically sensitive as well as a freer, more equal and non-exploitative mode of production.

He also gave more concrete responses on the nature of work under socialism (including on factories and machinery), on forms of energy, on transport, on hous-



Artwork from *News From Nowhere*

ing and urban life, and on lifestyle politics, that repay reading today.

Morris had read Marx’s *Capital* in French by 1884 (in an authorised English edition was still to be properly translated at this time). The first fruits of this reading were contained in the lecture, ‘Useful Work versus Useless Toil’, (21 January 1884). Morris expresses the primacy of nature in terms very similar to Marx, arguing that “Nature does not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by toil of some sort of degree” and that “Wealth is what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use. The sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth, food, raiment [clothing] and housing necessary and decent...” (Morton)

He also summed up the nature-society nexus in the language of the time: “Men urged by their necessities and desires have laboured for many thousands of years at the task of subjugating the forces of Nature and of making the natural material useful to them. To our eyes, since we cannot see into the future, that struggle with Nature seems nearly over, and the victory of the human race over her nearly complete... Thus then have the fruits of our victory over Nature been stolen from us, thus has compulsion by Nature to labour in hope of rest, gain, and pleasure been turned into compulsion by man to labour in hope - of living to labour! What shall we do then, can we mend it?” (Morton)

Morris repeated this theme in a lecture, ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’ (30 November 1884). He argued that humanity’s progress had been broken and halting “and though he has indeed conquered Nature and has her forces under his control to do what he will with, he still has himself to conquer, he still has to think how he will best use those forces which he has mastered. At present he uses them blindly, foolishly, as one driven by mere fate.

“It would almost seem as if some phantom of the ceaseless pursuit of food which was once the master of the savage was still haunting the civilised man; who toils in a dream, as it were, haunted by mere dim unreal hopes, born of vague recollections of the days gone by. Out of that dream he must wake, and face things as they really are. The conquest of Nature is complete, may we not say? and now our business is and has for

long been the organisation of man, who wields the forces of Nature.” (Morton 19)

Morris came close to identifying the dichotomy between nature and human society that Marx called in *Capital* the “metabolic rift”. This was most eloquently expressed in ‘Socialism from the Root Up’, jointly written with Bax and published in *Commonweal* (19 May 1888): “Consequently, with the development of material civilisation from the domination of things by persons to that of persons by things, and the consequent falling asunder of Society into two classes, a possessing and dominating class, and a non-possessing and dominated one, arose a condition of Society which gave leisure to the possessing or slave-holding class, the result of which was a possibility of observation and reflection amongst the upper class. As a consequence of this a process of reflection arose among this class which distinguished man as a conscious being from the rest of nature.

“From this again arose a dual conception of things: on the one hand was man, which was familiar and known, on the other nature, which was mysterious and relatively unknown. In nature itself grew a further distinction between its visible objects now regarded as unconscious things, and a supposed motive power which acted on them from behind, which was conceived of as manlike in character, but above mankind in knowledge and power, and no longer a part of the things themselves, but without them, and moving and controlling them.”

Morris also expressed this idea in his fiction. In *News from Nowhere*, he has Clara sum it up: “Was not their mistake once more bred of the life of slavery that they had been living? — a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate — ‘nature’, as people used to call it — as one thing, and mankind as another. It was natural to people thinking in this way, that they should try to make ‘nature’ their slave, since they thought ‘nature’ was something outside them.”

And Morris believed that through the socialist reorganisation of society the reconciliation of human society and nature would be affected. Humanity would be “set free from intestine warfare among ourselves for the nobler contest with Nature, and should find that she also when conquered, would be our friend, and not our enemy”. ‘Attractive Labour’, *Commonweal*, June 1885

Not that socialism was simply a panacea for all ecological problems. In a lecture, ‘Society of the Future’ (13 November 1887) raised the possibility of more profound changes in humanity’s relationship with the environment, where socialism would be “a society conscious of a wish to keep life simple, to forgo some of the power over Nature won by past ages in order to be more human and less mechanical, and willing to sacrifice something to this end.” (Morton).

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NEW ANTI-CAPITALIST PARTY

A new workers’ party in France

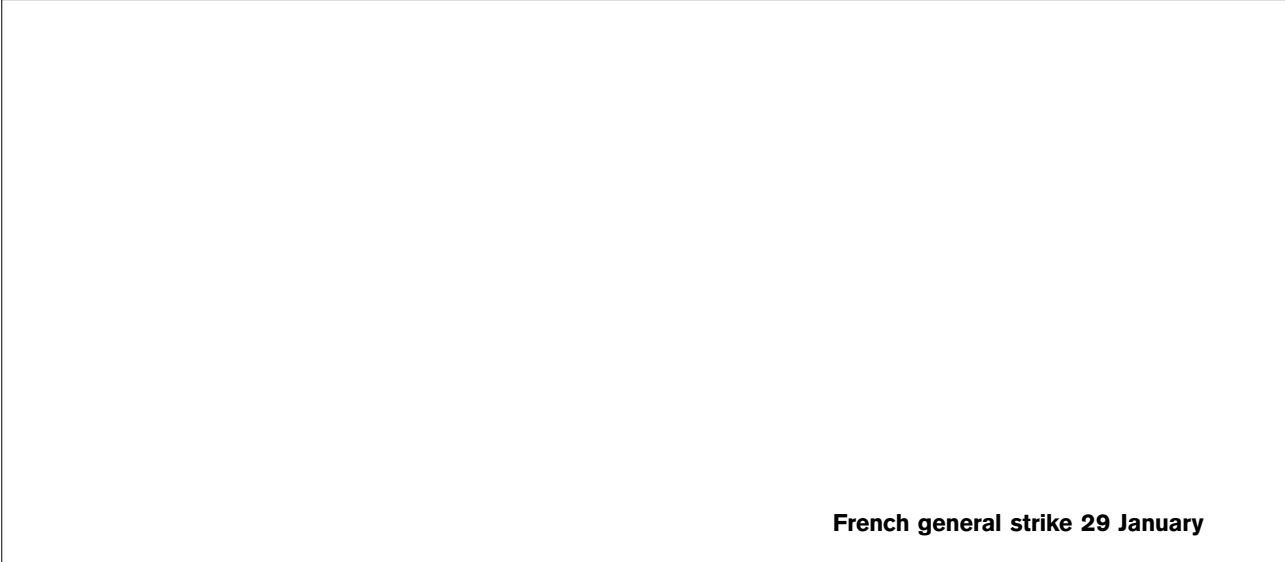
By Sacha Ismail and Vicki Morris

Over the weekend of 6-8 February, working-class activists in France took a big step towards the creation of a powerful revolutionary party. Their success is cause for rejoicing — and contains lessons for the British left.

The preparations for the launching of a “New Anti-capitalist Party” (NPA, a temporary name which has now been made permanent), initiated by the Fourth International’s French section, the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, have been under way for more than a year.

On 5 February, a congress of the LCR voted overwhelmingly to dissolve the organisation, and on 6 February close to 700 delegates met in St Denis, north of Paris, for the founding congress of the NPA. They were joined by many international observers, including a handful of British socialists, among them four members and three contacts of the AWL.

This initiative is coming to fruition after several years of stormy struggles by French workers and youth. 29 January saw what has been described as a one-day general strike (though in fact many French comrades were keen to insist that it was “inter-professional”, not actually general) against the bosses’ attempts to make the working class pay for the economic crisis. The action brought over two million onto the streets. Lecturers have begun an ongoing strike against neo-liberal education reforms, and both sec-



French general strike 29 January

ondary school and university students have been militant and scored some victories over the last few years. LCR and NPA members have been central to a number of these movements, and their organisations have to a certain extent become emblematic of the hopes and aspirations of those in struggle. This is what gives the new project its vitality.

Let us describe what was impressive about the congress. The 700 delegates represented 9,000 members, three times the size of the LCR, of whom 6,700 partici-

pated in local congresses in the run up to the national event. A majority of those present had not been members of the LCR; and while there was involvement from several smaller left groups — including Gauche Révolutionnaire, linked to the Socialist Party in Britain, and the expelled minority Faction of France’s other main revolutionary group, Lutte Ouvrière — most had not been in any party before.

Continued on page 16

INTERVIEW

“We need to create a common culture”

Daniel Bensaid, a leader of the former Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire and now of the NPA, spoke to Vicki Morris and Ed Maltby.

Six months from now, how will you measure the success of the New Anti-capitalist Party?

Well, I don’t want to make any predictions about the social movement, what it will be like in six months time. For us, we need to consolidate the fusion, on the cultural, educational and political levels. We have different cultures inside the NPA, and we need to work together to consolidate. We need a better effort of education, and to create a common culture.

We need to make sure that what results is pluralism, which is necessary, and not eclecticism.

We have a big challenge of educational training inside the NPA. We need new pedagogical methods. The LCR had very developed intellectual training, and many people with university education. Now we have more militants who haven’t necessarily had that.

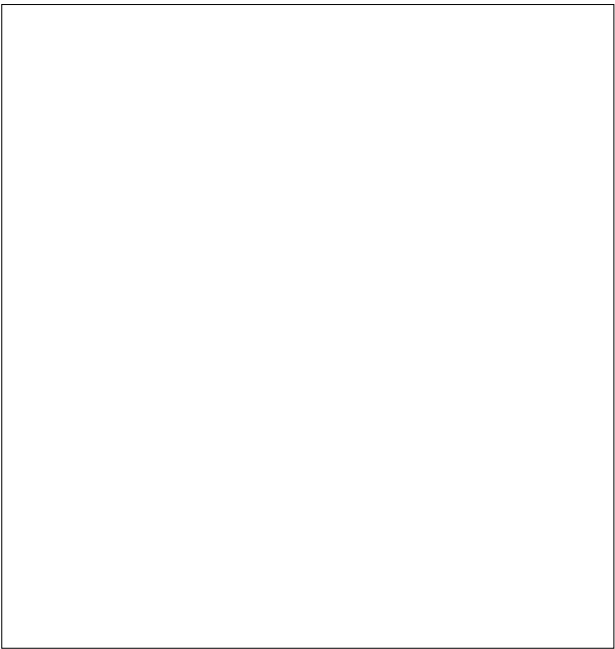
For example, if we want to teach about the Spanish civil war, we might be able to use things like the Ken Loach film to help people understand. We need to make more use of audio-visual material, the internet, and so on.

To illustrate this diversity, we have immigrants with their own national history. We have people from an Algerian background who will know more about the fight for Algerian independence than about the history of the Popular Front in France in the 1930s.

We have to create a common history and culture, and find new ways to work together.

In the programme of the NPA it says that you aim to achieve “a government at the service of the workers?” What do you mean by that? Isn’t it ambiguous? Does it mean a revolutionary government, or a government that is not directly revolutionary but that has been voted in with and is based on mass working-class support?

Well, we mean a government that is as loyal to our class as ruling-class governments are to theirs. But right now we are not a party of government. It’s a spec-



Daniel Bensaid

ulative formula. The question of government will be posed one day, but we are not there now, there is no point posing the problem now. At the moment, we need to change the balance of class forces in our favour. In order to convince people of that idea you can live with propagandistic ambiguity. The balance of forces can change. That’s the problem with Trotskyists, they think too much about these sorts of things! We are trying to simplify our lives.

At whom does NPA direct its demands?

At everyone. At Sarkozy. We are asking for an across-the-board rise in wages of 300 euros: it doesn’t matter who from. Whatever government you have. That’s how to create a political reality.

What is NPA policy toward the trade unions? Do you try to make them grow?

It’s an important issue. You have to ask yourselves why they have shrunk in the first place. The creation of SUD [group of class struggle trade unions] has changed things, but SUD is still small. There is an important tradition of radical/revolutionary trade unions in France. The CGT [largest trade union federation] is less subordinated to the Communist Party than it was. We are working inside SUD, CGT and the FSU [the largest teachers’ union].

What are the biggest dangers in this period? What mistakes could the NPA make now?

The biggest mistake we could make — but I don’t think we are going to — is to try to get close to the ‘left’ of the Socialist Party. That’s unlikely to happen because the NPA right now is very “leftist”, in a positive sense. We have confidence in ourselves and don’t want to go into alliances like that. The Socialist Party is not a factor in the lives of working-class people. As we get bigger we might have to think more about how we relate to them politically.

Might we become victims of our own success? Olivier Besancenot is immensely popular and is in the media a lot: this can give you a distorted view. We have to have a clear idea of the real balance of forces in the country. We are on 10 percent in the opinion polls for the European elections in June, but I don’t think we will get that. We have to keep our feet on the ground and we can do that. But while the media is interested we can use it.

We have nine thousand members. That’s good, but the Communist Party has 40 thousand members. Measured by their activity, I say that one NPA militant is worth two CP militants, but we shouldn’t get an inflated sense of our own importance.

• More coverage, including more interviews from the NPA congress, at www.workersliberty.org/npa-lcr

From page 15

There was a strong representation of, and participation by, women; and, though the congress was not overwhelmingly young, strong involvement of youth. Particularly for those of us used to fighting the anti-democratic practices of the majority of British “Trotskyists”, the democracy of the congress was strikingly impressive: despite the huge number of amendments to the founding texts, there was very free and wide-ranging discussion with wide participation. Significant minorities, for instance the ex-LCR “Unir” tendency of Christian Picquet were given representation on the new national committee.

But what kind of party were they founding?

Compared to attempts at left regroupment in other European countries — the Scottish Socialist Party, Italy’s Communist Refoundation and Germany’s Die Linke, for instance — the NPA is solid politically. Its founding text defines it as revolutionary, and promises a break with the *gauche institutionnelle* of the Socialist and Communist Parties, and with the institutions of the bourgeois state. The claim by some on the far left that, in dissolving into the NPA, the LCR has abandoned the programme of Trotskyism, seems to us to be somewhat misplaced. Undoubtedly there were problems with the politics of the LCR, which may create corresponding problems in the NPA; but what defines a party as revolutionary is not use of Marxist jargon in its founding documents or adherence to a finished and unchanging program, but its attitude to class struggle. Everyone we spoke to in Paris was adamant that the NPA will be a “party of struggle” and was able to explain in detail how that made it different from e.g. Die Linke.

Indeed one crucial area of contention was how to relate in the upcoming European elections to the Communist Party and the Parti de Gauche, a Die Linke-style split from the Socialist Party. The congress voted 467 to 101, with about fifty abstentions, against the “anti-neo-liberal” alliance which is central to the strategy of Unir and in favour of an independent NPA intervention on the basis of anti-capitalism.

Having said that, to judge from the congress proceedings and the discussion we had with people, there seem to us to be a number of problems.

1. UNITED FRONTS

Everyone in the NPA is keen to insist on the bankruptcy of the governmental left parties, the SP and CP. Clearly that is right, but it does not absolve revolutionaries from relating to the tens of thousands of workers still in these parties and the millions who vote for them. If NPA members can strike and demonstrate in concert with workers who support the reformist parties, while maintaining their independent programme, should they not also seek to give this united front a political expression — at the very least to expose the unwillingness of the SP and CP leaders to break with the bosses?

This is a different question from forming common electoral lists with these parties or elements of them, as Unir proposed and as Lutte Ouvriere, having refused to participate in the NPA, did in the last local elections. If, as seems quite likely, for instance, the NPA wins significant representation in local government, it may find itself in a situation where its votes can give the SP or CP the majority. Surely revolutionaries should pose

conditions — along the lines of “If you break with the bosses and their institutions and carry out these demands, we will support you against the right, while maintaining our independence and freedom of criticism” — rather than simply glorying in their minority status.

There is also, on a different level, a need for a clear united front policy towards Lutte Ouvriere, which despite its sectarianism towards the NPA project, remains a substantial revolutionary tendency with deep roots in many workplaces.

2. WORKERS’ GOVERNMENT

This relates directly to another question: what sort of government the NPA is fighting for. The founding text uses the formulation of “a government at the service of the workers”, a formulation which contains much ambiguity. Does it mean a revolutionary workers’ state, or a transitional formation, a “workers’ government” elected to office but resting for its power on the massed strength of the working class in struggle?

A revolution is not, in the immediate term, on the agenda, but the driving of Sarkozy from power is. What will the workers replace him with? At the moment, the only alternative is the social-liberal Socialist Party. But this brings us back to the question of united fronts: if the various workers’ organisations — trade unions, CP, NPA, even elements of the SP — can unite for struggle against the bosses’ attacks, should we not also fight for the workers’ movement to create a government which carries out a corresponding programme of reforms, a government of struggle which pushes the class struggle forward?

There are no easy answers to such questions, but at the moment most of the NPA comrades seem content to leave them for another day.

3. THE UNIONS

The NPA does not seem to have a clear programme for fighting in and transforming the trade union movement as such, as opposed to building revolutionary caucuses within them.

Again, this is a question that most seem willing to leave for now. A healthy desire to concentrate on activism in the workplace, and avoid fantasies about providing a ready-made alternative leadership, may play a role here; so may over-reaction on the part of some new comrades against the Communist Party’s previous domination of the labour movement. But a revolutionary party needs a programme for the transformation of the whole labour movement, one which militants who are not its members can fight for, and not just a determination to recruit workers by ones or in small groups.

4. MEMBERSHIP

“Anyone can be a member of the party if they agree with the basics of the ‘founding principles’ and join a local committee; that is, if they have a membership card, participate in party activities and meetings to the extent that they are able, and pay their dues.”

These fairly minimal requirements of membership were explained to us by one comrade as simply mandating flexibility, over and above a basic level of

activism, in order to more easily integrate an influx of workers, those with childcare responsibilities, and so on. Certainly, everyone was very insistent that the NPA will be a “party of militants” (i.e. activists). Nevertheless, with such fast growth, there must a danger of creating a soft underbelly of relatively inactive members.

5. YOUTH

The NPA youth were a bit messed around by the congress. An amendment about youth work was sent back for redrafting partly on the grounds that anti-war agitation, one of the three main campaign planks it proposed (alongside the struggle in the universities and “organising the youth”, i.e. young workers, school students) is not specifically a “youth issue”.

The discussion on what to do about this, on the first night of the congress, took place outside in the freezing cold, since a room had not been found to have it in! Meanwhile, the NPA, unlike the LCR, will not have an autonomous youth section, not because the young people do not want it, but because some older members object on grounds of opposing youth separatism. Again, this problem is in part only potential — and for sure the youth were not treated in the shabby way that is customary on the British far left — but it is something to keep an eye on.

With these qualifications, the founding of the NPA is an event that should be celebrated. It has the potential to significantly shift both French and world politics. In addition to regrouping many French socialists, previously affiliated and unaffiliated, into a single party, it looks certain to attract wide support in the labour movement and more generally. We were told, and it seemed plausible, that recruitment is not a problem; to a greater and greater extent, working-class activists are approaching the party and asking to join. Meanwhile, there are opinion polls which put the party’s standard bearer and likely presidential candidate, postal worker Olivier Besancenot, who won over four percent last time, on as high as 18 percent.

Lastly, the dissolving of the LCR and the creation of a small but real revolutionary party in France are likely to have big consequences for the socialist left internationally. Apart from anything else, the NPA will not be part of the Fourth International — to which the LCR adhered and which it basically bankrolled — but is hoping to build a broader international anti-capitalist movement.

The lessons for Britain are fairly simple. Even in the period of the Socialist Alliance, the bulk of the British left divided between sterile revolutionary declamation and (the majority) pretending to be reformists; then the opportunistic drive to take a short-cut to mass influence in the anti-war movement through the Respect-Galloway fiasco destroyed whatever beginnings had been made.

In contrast the dominant sections of the French left, whatever criticisms can be made, have focused on a basic class-struggle approach, using elections to agitate and propagandise for the idea of workers’ political independence and the transitional demands-type idea of an “emergency plan” for the working class to defend itself and pass over onto the offensive. The NPA is the fruit of that vitally important orientation and struggle.

WHERE WE STAND

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Society is shaped by the capitalists’ relentless drive to increase their wealth. Capitalism causes poverty, unemployment, the blighting of lives by overwork, imperialism, the destruction of the environment and much else.

Against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, the working class has one weapon: solidarity.

The Alliance for Workers’ Liberty aims to build solidarity through struggle so that the working class can overthrow capitalism. We want socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers’ control and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats’ and managers’ privileges.

We fight for the labour movement to break with “social partnership” and assert working-class interests militantly against the bosses.

Our priority is to work in the workplaces and trade unions, supporting workers’ struggles, producing workplace bulletins, helping organise rank-and-file groups.

We are also active among students and in many campaigns and alliances.

We stand for:

- Independent working-class representation in politics.
- A workers’ government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
- A workers’ charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
- Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
- A workers’ movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women and social provision to free women from the burden of housework. Free abortion on request. Full equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Black and white workers’ unity against racism.
- Open borders.

- Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.

- Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.

- Working-class solidarity in international politics: equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
- Maximum left unity in action, and openness in debate.

GAZA

The “cowardice” of AWL on the Gaza War?

A debate from our website
(www.workersliberty.org/node/11941)

Sean Matgamna’s article (*Solidarity* 3/145) blasts the Socialist Party for concealing its real views (the two-state solution) for fear of being unpopular, or provoking anger from pro-Hamas demonstrators. The question of political courage runs like a red thread in this article and Sean correctly writes that “the socialist who is afraid to be unpopular who cannot stand against the tide, or even the stream, is a poor little specimen indeed.”

Reading these articles, as well as the extensive coverage of the AWL’s brave efforts to get its message across to pro-Hamas demonstrators in Sheffield and elsewhere, I cannot help but wonder why the AWL doesn’t present that same message to a 15,000 strong rally in London? (And a decent sized one in Manchester as well.)

One would think that with your “third camp” politics, you’d be eager to hold up your placards with their “Down with Hamas, Down with the IDF” not only at pro-Hamas rallies, but even at pro-peace ones organised by the Jewish community?

But you don’t. I wonder why. Could it be that the Socialist Party is not the only group on Britain’s far left with a muddled message, lacking in political courage?

Eric Lee

NOT ISRAELI NATIONALISTS

Eric Lee seems to have an identity problem! He confuses AWL and AWL politics with himself and his own politics. We did things and raised slogans that expressed our politics, and he blames us for not expressing his! Eric is an Israeli nationalist — a ‘my country right or wrong’ nationalist. We are international socialists. We roundly condemn what Israel has just done in Gaza.

Living in a political world that is crazedly “anti-Zionist” and anti-Israel, of course we defend Israel’s right to exist, try to explain the Israeli point of view, defend the “Two Nations, Two States” position, fight against the demonisation of Israel and “Zionism”. During the recent war, we reminded people of the Hamas rockets.

In principle AWL supports the right of the Palestinians to fight and drive out the Israeli occupation forces, whatever the politics of those leading the Palestinians at a given moment. That is complicated in practice by the political programme of, in this case, Hamas, which proclaims the goal of destroying Israel, and by the fact that they are allied with other reactionaries in the Arab-Islamic world who proclaim the same programme. It is, however, our base-line position.

On the London demo, we did shout on the loudspeaker “Down with Hamas”, etc. Because of the politics of the audience there, as in Sheffield, it was necessary and permissible to “bend the stick” a bit. But in cold and considered expressions of our politics we do not put an equals sign between Israel and the Palestinians, not even because Hamas is politically so very reactionary.

We say, and in *Solidarity* and on the demos we said, that Israel should get out of Gaza and West Bank. Immediately.

“Third Campism” has nothing to do with it! (Nor anything to do with Eric’s position, either: he is decidedly in the Israel camp).

The Hamas rockets, etc., justified Israel in inflicting the massive carnage and destruction which it has just inflicted on the Palestinians in Gaza? In the existing circumstances that idea can be sustained from one point of view only — that of a steel-clad, asbestos-lined, paranoia-infected Israeli national egotism.

Do you seriously want to argue that it simply doesn’t matter how many Palestinians are killed? That there is not a grotesque, obscene, disproportionality in what happened in Gaza? That the widespread outrage against Israel was not justified? That it was a pure outpouring of anti-Jewish prejudice? I agree that we must fight the prejudice. International socialists — “Third Campists”, if you prefer that — must also know when to side with the Palestinians against the indefensible use of its military power by Israel.

Those who are not reflex Israeli chauvinists will know



when not to side with Israel. For myself, I take a friendly attitude to Israeli nationalism, and, in retrospect, to the pre-World War Two movement for a Jewish state, believing that of all peoples, post-Holocaust Jews have a right to be nationalist. That is not the same thing as Israeli chauvinism... Or the same as proclaiming the principle “Israel — right or wrong!”

Eric might like to comment on this point from the editorial in the last *Solidarity*: “Politically [the war] arises out of the Israeli establishment’s refusal to work effectively to lay the political foundations of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. Nothing less will do for the Palestinians.

“Above all else, it is Israel’s refusal, despite hypocritical words, to accept and actively work for that political settlement that sets the scene for continuing conflict. It wasn’t always so. For half a century most of the Arab states refused to recognise Israel. It is so now that the Arab League (of states) proposes a settlement that would on the Arab side involve recognition of Israel.”

Eric might also tell us what is wrong with this statement in the editorial:

“[The foregoing] discredits the Israeli nationalist case for the present war as the necessary means to stop Hamas rockets raining down on Israel. It renders all simple Israeli nationalist arguments from Israel’s inalienable right to defend itself indistinguishable from outright Israeli chauvinism. Other, better, ways to the same Israeli end are possible and more likely to bring a long-term peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Ways that give to the Palestinians the just settlement to which they have an inalienable right: their own state, side by side with Israel.”

Eric confuses Israeli chauvinism with Third Camp independent socialism. We are internationalists. We defend nations and national movements, when we do, as internationalists, as international socialists, or else we are not socialists at all.

Sean Matgamna

I’M NOT AN ISRAELI NATIONALIST EITHER!

Sean says that Eric Lee’s and my position is Israeli nationalist. I am not an Israeli nationalist — I am a Zionist.

Zionism is the national liberation struggle of the Jewish people. Like any other national movement Zionism is comprised of people from different classes and political opinions — to categorise all Zionists as “nationalists” or “chauvinists” seems to me to be rather unhelpful about people like me and Eric (who want peace with the Palestinian people and support the struggles of the Israeli and Palestinian trade union movements).

Sean says that we support Israel as “my country right or wrong”.

I primarily support Israel because it is a democracy.

I don’t see a contradiction between being a Zionist supporter of Israeli democracy and being an international socialist.

As an international socialist I support working class struggle throughout the world.

You say that the AWL “supports the right of the Palestinians to fight and drive out the Israeli occupation forces”. The last two wars (2006 and 2009) were pro-

voked by terrorists operating from territory that Israel has already left — so where does “occupation” come into it? The terrorists like to hide behind women and children as human shields but they are a lot less likely to stand and engage the IDF in open combat.

The basic problem with the position of the AWL is that although it supports a two-state solution it seems to lay the majority of the blame for the failure of the peace process at Israel’s door. The Palestinians reverted to terrorism in 1996 and rejected Ehud Barak’s proposals in 2000 and launched the second intifada and the suicide bombings. As a National Council member of The Zionist Federation — I have met many of the Israeli political leaders and IDF commanders who have always stressed their desire to return to peaceful negotiations with the Palestinians — I totally believe the sincerity of what they said.

Ian Sternberg

THE ONLY POSSIBLE JUSTIFICATION IS ISRAELI CHAUVINISM

Ian Sternberg: as I said in reply to Eric Lee, “Do you seriously want to argue that it simply doesn’t matter how many Palestinians are killed? That there is not a grotesque, obscene, disproportionality in what happened in Gaza? That the widespread outrage against Israel was not justified?”

The fundamental political case against Israel’s Gaza war is that there were better, far better, alternatives open to Israel: really and actively accepting the two states position, negotiating a broad framework of settlement with the Arab League, something that seems now to be possible, and, within that framework, sorting out Hamas and its rocket war on Israel. Israel’s government chose instead to pulverise Palestinian society in Gaza... a hi-tech Hamas-hunt from the air that could not but produce massive civilian casualties. For that reason alone the Israeli Government should be condemned.

Yes, we do lay the “majority of the blame” on Israel. Why? Because now — not throughout its long interaction with the Palestinians and other Arabs, but now — Israel is immensely strong, and therefore could shape events. Israel was and is strong enough to create a new political framework by way of a “Land for Peace” agreement with the Arab League, and the establishment of a Palestinian state that would satisfy most Palestinians.

But leave the big political framework aside. A war that inflicted such death and destruction as Israel inflicted on a people so mis-matched militarily against Israel that they were virtually helpless and without defences, is a war that socialists must condemn, if they are socialists in more than name.

The disproportion between Hamas rockets and what Israel has just done in Gaza is so great that the only possible justification for it is rampant Israeli chauvinism, the belief that one dead Israeli is more important than a couple of hundred dead Palestinians; the belief that the horrors of ineffectual Hamas shells dropping on Israel are more important than the vast death and destruction inflicted on the Palestinians in the 3-week Gaza war.

I wouldn’t treat dumb animals the way Israel has just treated the Palestinians. Would you? Would Eric Lee? Would the Israeli Prime Minister?

The fundamental case against the war is the political one outlined above. Even if this were not so, socialist sympathisers with Israel would surely recoil from the terrible carnage and destruction, say, “there must be a better way than this”, and condemn the onslaught on Gaza. Wouldn’t we? Shouldn’t we? Shouldn’t you? Shouldn’t Eric Lee?

And for all the carnage, Hamas has not been destroyed and it is still capable of launching rockets on Israel. Politically Hamas has been strengthened amongst the Palestinians, and so, it seems, has the Israeli right.

You say: “I am not an Israeli nationalist — I am a Zionist... to categorise all Zionists as ‘nationalists’ or ‘chauvinists’ seems to me to be rather unhelpful...”

Where did I do that? In what I understand as the fundamental sense of the word, support for a Jewish state, I am a Zionist. I think Israel has the inalienable right to defend itself.

It would have a right to wage war, irrespective to the

The Latin American governments may turn towards import substitution policies

MARXIST ECONOMISTS ON THE CRISIS: MICHEL HUSSON

A systemic crisis

The world economic crisis took a sharp turn for the worse in September 2008. Some of the Marxist economists who had discussed the crisis in a first series of interviews, March-July 2008, have commented again. We continue the series with Michel Husson.

1. Do you think that the recent nationalisations and big bail-outs signify a major change in the configuration of capitalism? What sort of new regime could result from the crisis?

The nationalisations are only pseudo-nationalisations. They are partial, provisional, and almost unconditional. They are aimed at re-establishing the profitability of the banking system and furnishing it with the instruments for restructuring. If it was really a matter of reconfiguring capitalism, these injections of public money should have been the occasion for imposing tighter rules of functioning on the banks. The speeches about the need for regulation and the struggle against tax havens are only distractions. The most probable outcome is that the liquidity handed out today will just feed the next bubble.

The public intervention nevertheless constitutes a confession which puts into question one of the foundations of neo-liberalism, namely the optimality of private finance. But it is not enough in itself to set in motion a transition to a new regime.

The old regime was based on the reduction of the wage-share, compensated for by households becoming over-indebted, plus, in the case of the United States, the financing of growth by the rest of the world. The two pillars of that model are now in question: households can no longer hold up market demand by expanding their debt, and so the recession has become a classic crisis of overproduction and difficulty in “realising” surplus-value. And the deficit financing of the United States has become uncertain, all the more so because the surpluses of the emerging economies are going to tend to shrink.

2. The government are trying to put into practice what their economists have learned, as regards stabilisation policies, from the study of the 1930s and of the depression in Japan in the 1990s. What are the limits and incapacities of these policies?

The reflationary measures are inadequate in so far as they cannot lead to a re-establishment of a more equitable distribution between wages and profits. That is the essential condition for the establishment of, or rather for a return to, a model of the Keynesian-Fordist type.

But it would presuppose a challenge to the inequalities which have increased in recent decades, to different degrees, in the United States, in Europe, and even in China. The stabilisation policies are thus going to allow the system to avoid a crisis like that of the 1930s, but they do not involve measures capable of avoiding a depression analogous to that which Japan suffered throughout the 1990s.

3. The subprime crisis in the United States, although sizeable, involved much smaller sums than those in play in the

crisis today. How is that a relatively small disturbance produced such huge consequences?

The spread of the subprime crisis to the whole financial system is a revelation of the degree of integration of the world economy and of the financial system. The hypothesis of “decoupling”, put forward at the start of the crisis, according to which Europe and China would be safe from the effects of the crisis and so would allow the world to avoid a generalised crisis, rapidly misfired.

4. In recent months, it has been governments, not only banks, in trouble. The reserves of the IMF are relatively small, and the biggest funds are held by the governments, the central banks, and the sovereign wealth funds of East Asia and the Gulf states. Do you think that this crisis could bring an important shift in the balance of forces at a world level?

The crisis is far from over, and the degree of coordination among the capitalist authorities (governments, banks, IMF, sovereign wealth funds, European institutions, etc.) is advancing under the pressure of the emergency. But it is not enough to make us envisage the establishment of a new Bretton Woods. The most probable scenario on the months to come is, on the contrary, the sharpening of the contradictions.

Despite the globalisation of production, inter-state contradictions are going to take on a new sharpness, with each state trying to pass the costs of the crisis onto others. The United States is going to try to impose a new reduction of the exchange-rate of the dollar, which is necessary to rebalance their trade deficit.

In Europe, each country is very differently positioned in relation to the crisis, depending on the relative weight of finance, of the property market and the car industry, and its mode of insertion into the world market. A truly coordinated economic policy is thus beyond reach, all the more so because the European Union has voluntarily deprived itself of the institutions which could allow it to be pursued, in particular a sufficient federal European budget. The countries of the South, especially Latin America and Asia, will tend to re-focus themselves on their internal and regional markets, on the model of the import substitution policies pursued in Latin America after the crisis of the 1930s.

Inside each country, the capital-labour contradiction will be deepened. There are few things in the plans for rescue or reflation which favour wage-workers, and meanwhile businesses will seize the opportunity of the crisis to re-establish their conditions of profitability. Finally, public budgets will be weighed down by the sums squandered in hand-outs to banks and businesses, and so social budgets will be cut again.

The political conjuncture of the months and years to come will doubtless be characterised by a race between the rise of orientations of a nationalist or protectionist type, and the rise of social struggles.

• Interview conducted on 5 December 2008. Michel Husson is a Marxist economist well-known on the French left, author of many books include *Critique de la marchandisation* (forthcoming) and until 2007 a member of the LCR. He responded to questions posed by Martin Thomas.

cost to its opponents, if that were the alternative to being conquered and its people put at the mercy of the conquerers. Zionism, surely, is nationalism, but not thereby to be condemned. I wrote that post-Holocaust Jews had good reason to be nationalists. Not all nationalists are “my country right or wrong” people, still less are all Zionists narrow chauvinists. But people who support unjust and unnecessary wars and the sort of strong-power bullying of the Palestinians which Israel has just inflicted on the people of Gaza — they are chauvinists.

Calling them “terrorists” as if that settles everything is to pull the fashionable ideological wool over your own eyes. Here “terrorism” is just a name used by the strong against the military tactics of the weak. AWL condemned the homicide bomb campaign in Israel for pretty much the same reason that we condemn Israel in Gaza — because they targeted civilians (Israel didn’t target civilians, but that makes no fundamental difference to the consequences of what it did in Gaza).

The history of modern Ireland suggests that for the foreseeable future, even after the setting up of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel, there will be “rejectionists” amongst the Arabs. They may do things such as the IRA did in the 1950s, when it mounted guerrilla raids from the South into Northern Ireland, planted bombs, shot policemen, hijacked trains and tried to wreck them, etc. A political settlement with all or most of its Arab neighbours would give Israel allies against “rejectionist” guerrillas and terrorists. But there will most likely be terrorism, more or less intensive, by people based in the surrounding states, for a very long time.

Israel should respond to such things by going berserk against its neighbours, as in Gaza, against wherever the rejectionist terrorists are based? That would mean that no peace, no relative normalisation, no peaceful co-existence with its Arab neighbours will ever, foreseeably, be possible for Israel.

Israel should not have done what it did in Gaza... socialists, including socialist Zionists, should not support it in what it did there.

Sean Matgamma

A POINT OF DISAGREEMENT

Clearly I don't share the far left's holy terror at the word; but I don't see how socialists can call themselves Zionists. I am for Israel's right to exist, but that doesn't make me (or you) a Zionist, any more than being for Palestinian independence makes us Palestinian nationalists.

We shouldn't go along with the 'anti-Zionist' outcry, but nor should we use language which potentially blurs the opposition to nationalism — as opposed to national rights — that all of us in the AWL agree is essential for international socialists.

Sacha Ismail

AM I “ZIONIST”?

One one level it's a sterile argument, whether we are “Zionists” or not. I defined what I understand by it: support for a Jewish state. That describes me, and though Sacha is entitled to reject the label for himself, I think it describes him. I didn't say AWL is “Zionist” because I know comrades, like Sacha, would disagree.

I counterposed Zionism in general, meaning support for a Jewish state, to the “nationalism” I see in Ian Sternberg and Eric Lee.

We, AWL, are international socialists, not any sort of nationalists; we do however, from our own point of view, champion national rights and national freedom for those who want it — here for the Palestinian and the Israeli Jewish nations.

Yet there is a point. The word “Zionist” is used in the kitsch-left as a near equivalent of “racist”. It encapsulates the demonisation of Israel and of Jewish people who support it. It sums up the grotesque, and originally Stalinist, misrepresentation of both the history of Zionism and of the Jews in the Twentieth Century, on which the “absolute anti-Zionists” erect their toxic nonsense. It is a tool of ideological terrorism on the “left”. The cleanest and simplest way of dealing with that is to accept it, in its proper, original, meaning, and wear it as a badge of political sanity.

The example of Eleanor Marx strikes me as a good example: when the “anti-alien (anti-Jewish) agitation was at its most intense, at the end of the nineteenth century, she told the East End workers, who knew her as their supporter, that she was “a Jewess”. One of her grandfathers, Karl Marx's father, was a Jewish “convert” to Christianity, seeking the civil liberties such a “conversion” brought. She had less reason for adopting the name of the targets of the anti-alien agitation than supporters of a Jewish state have for calling themselves “Zionists”. But, let's agree to differ on it, Sacha.

Sean Matgamma

AS WE WERE SAYING

When dockers marched for a Tory racist

The recent construction workers' strikes began under the slogan "British Jobs For British Workers". Though the events were not at all identical, the slogan brings echoes of the strikes in 1968 and 1972 around the admission to Britain of Asians holding British passports, first from Kenya and in 1972 from Uganda.

The April 1968 the Labour government revoked the right of the Kenya Asians to come to Britain; in 1972, the Tory government let the Uganda Asians in. In both cases there was uproar in the working class against the incomers.

In 1968 some of the most militant workers in Britain, London dockworkers, who had only a few months before fought and lost a ten-week strike in their own defence, went on strike on the issue.

Tory front-bencher Enoch Powell made an inflammatory speech against immigration, and when he was sacked from the Tory front bench, the dockers came out on strike and marched on a demonstration in defence of "free speech for Powell". They struck because they agreed with Powell.

Just as Gordon Brown's call for "British Jobs For British Workers" probably influenced the construction workers, so in 1968 the then Labour government primed the dockworkers' response. The government brought in a scandalously racist immigration law, and barred the door to the Kenyan refugees. People remember Powell's speech, not the foul deeds of Labour Home Secretary (and later prime minister, 1976-9) James Callaghan.

The following comments on these events were editorials (written by Rachel and Sean Matgamna) in *Workers' Fight*, a distant predecessor of *Solidarity*. The words in the first about "not soft-peddalling the politics" were references, which readers then would have understood, to the then policy of IS (now the SWP).

When thousands of workers, including the most militant in industry, stop work in support of the calculated demagoguery of a "civilized" Tory barbarian, it is a grim warning to all socialists and all thinking elements in the labour movement. A wave of reaction is creeping up on us. And it could gain greater force as the Labour Government grinds slowly, and by all appearances inevitably, to an ignominious end.

There is a general atmosphere of crisis and helplessness; an atmosphere of bitter and savage disappointment with the Government. The pressures of rising unemployment and cuts in living standards are increasing. There is widespread confusion as to causes and solutions. Socialist explanation is noticeably absent from the scene: the level of general socialist understanding of the overall picture is at its lowest ebb. Widespread cynicism with politics is like a creeping fog, and working class action in response to and in face of the treachery of the "workers' party" [the Labour Party] has narrowed down to industrial action.

Though immensely promising, the raw material of progress and the beginning of socialist wisdom, this is not enough. Though industrial action today has unavoidable political implications, it has not brought about, for the workers as a whole, a clear consciousness of working class politics and solutions. Socialist leadership on a mass scale is non-existent. The official Labour left becomes more pathetic and more loyal to Wilson with each new day and each new Government outrage.

And the pressures become still more intense. In the absence of a socialist consciousness and an effective socialist movement to fight for it, the workers are now, more even than usually, wide open to the lying demagoguery of press and politicians. We even see the Tory Party making political capital out of Labour legislation on the Trade Unions!

In this situation racialism, endemic in this country as the former colonial master of Africa and Asia, is a handy weapon; it both sets up a scapegoat for the workers' anger and at the same time provides a means of dividing the workers at a time when capitalism finds it necessary to tighten the screws and inflict defeats on the class. And in the mad rush of politicians

to use it, their leapfrogging has produced a rapid escalation of the disease.

Ten years or so ago one had to be a professional backstreet racist to harp on about the supposed "problems" created by immigrants. Now we hear it daily from the mouths of Cabinet Ministers and their shadows, and the fascists proclaim themselves vindicated, emerging into the brightly-lit highways of respectability. [Notoriously racist Tory MP] Peter Griffiths was able to call Callaghan a racist over the Kenya Asians! Racialism has been sanctified in Acts of Parliament setting the seal of officialdom to the ignorant bigotry about "overcrowded island" and "strains on the social services". Labour and Tory are quite bipartisan about it — they vie with each other in the use of it.

Labour's reaction to Powell was that of the man outbid, and Tory leaders hastened to stress that their disagreement was with Powell's language, not his meaning. (A source of some of the sympathy for Powell, leading to the demands for 'free speech').

Given all this, the pressures, the fears, the misinformation and demagoguery, and the lack of any socialist leadership, we got the amalgam of militancy and racialism, on the London docks and elsewhere. It reflects the backwardness of even industrial militants, and at the same time irrefutable proof that industrial militancy doesn't spontaneously grow into the appropriate socialist consciousness. If anything it pinpoints the chasm between these.

The militant London dockers took up first place in the shameful parade of suicidal confusion, seeing it as just another measure of self-defence.

They are facing massive redundancy as a result of their inability to defeat the Devlin [docks restructuring] scheme last autumn. ([TGWU general secretary Frank] Cousins, like a good liberal, deplores the dockers' racialism: but as one who betrayed them last autumn he is actively responsible for their openness to the influence of Powell.) The great militancy was not sufficient to allay the threat to the industry which the coming automation poses, and the lack of a socialist alternative to Devlin in that struggle enormously contributed both to the defeat then and the confusion now.

Nor have they even the most minimal political outlet. In the past they would have placed their hopes in the Labour Party, voting for it as the political action to back up militancy: fight on the job — vote Labour. Now they are disoriented because of the lack of an alternative socialist programme and organisation, and have blundered into the first blind alley: one consciously constructed to make them less effective.

The vile white racialism has as its driving force the current pressures on the workers — hardening consciousness of differences into ignorant prejudice. But we should not forget that it is usually easier to move workers in line with official ideology and propaganda rather than against it. The habit of demonstrating politically must be developed and channelled in the right direction, against the real culprits. (The possibility of this happening has not escaped certain sections of the ruling class.) This is the ever more urgent job of socialists.

Some lessons are clear: don't soft-pedal on the politics. Don't tail-end after simple syndicalism. There are no vacuums. It will be either working-class politics, or Powell's and the *Daily Express* or even, in a crisis, worse.

There is an enormous gap between the pressures and the consciousness of the workers involved. Only the socialist movement can bridge that gap, and it now lags enormously behind what has to be done as the pressures increase and the gap widens further. The fear of politics as "sectarianism" only helps perpetuate this, as just one example shows.

The "Communist" Party, which has some influence on the London docks, violently opposed including the necessary politics in the fight against Devlin. As a result, [CP dockers' leader Jack] Dash didn't dare show his face for the two weeks that the dockers went mad. The picture presented in the papers of the CP executive member [Danny] Lyons standing forlornly at the dock gates flanked on either side by a Catholic and Protestant priest as the workers streamed contemptuously past is one that socialists should not forget in a hurry. If this is the only answer to Powell, we have lost

before we start. Thus it can be a short road from denouncing as "sectarian" the politicising of the strike, to playing the altar-boy at the dock gates.

After the Notting Hill [racist] riots [of 1958], and in face of the mounting campaign of prejudice-fostering propaganda and misinformation, the left should have launched a massive campaign to counteract this, and to integrate the immigrants in the labour movement. That this wasn't done is one measure of the feebleness of the left. If we don't do it now, we will surely be pushed aside by the bandwagon which Wilson and Callaghan set going for Powell.

• *Workers' Fight*, May 1968

To the list of this rotten government's crimes... it has now added a piece of the most blatant and frank racist legislation this country has known... The political of the crank right-wing groups and of such Tories as [Enoch] Powell and the sometime pro-Nazi [Duncan] Sandys were taken up and rushed through Parliament by [Home Secretary] Callaghan with the full backing of the Cabinet. As usual, there was only a token backbench opposition from a tiny handful.

This was panic legislation in servile and automatic response to the widespread alarm which the Tory right fringe and the hyena press had whipped up. The Kenya Asians had been given the option of British citizenship in order to smooth the reorganisation of the old Empire in East Africa. On trying to use it, they now find the door to the "motherland" locked and barred against them.

The Tories made the promises — and Labour, under pressure of the very same Tories, has disgraced itself in breaking them: disgraced itself even by *their* standards, let alone the traditions and principles of the working-class movement...

Back in 1962 the Labour leaders promised to repeal the Tories' Immigration Bill. Now they are falling over themselves, plugging up the loopholes and stiffening the penalties. This Government is so reactionary than [Tory MP] Iain Macleod and the Archbishop of Canterbury must seem enlightened by contrast.

The Government's motive was to gain a cheap popularity amongst the more backward sections of the electorate: there is no other explanation for their actions...

The "Socialist" Callaghan... set a quota of 1500 per year, and at first resisted even the demand for an appeals mechanism...

The treatment of the Kenya Asians was not just a passive reflection of the racialism whipped up by the press and the Right Tories. It is the sanctification of racialism as official government policy — and therefore the nurturing of the seeds of racist poison directed against the immigrant workers already living in this country...

The Government's motive is to distract attention from its own and the system's sorry failures. The effect is to create and widen divisions in the working class by injecting racist poison to do its work in conjunction with the social pressures of the system...

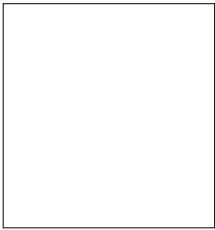
This can only enfeeble the working class in the struggle against the Government attacks on our standards. Either way the Government benefits — and we lose. Racialism is nothing other than a virulent cancer cell in the labour movement. In certain conditions it could destroy it altogether by turning it against itself.

For its own defence — if for no other reason — the labour movement must repudiate this racialism and denounce its perpetrators: the Government, the Judas "left" in the Cabinet, the MPs who voted for it - and those who hadn't the guts to stand up and fight it. Socialists in the Labour Party must agitate and organise in opposition to this latest demonstration of the deep capitalist decadence of the Labour leaders. The first steps to cleansing the atmosphere must be the repeal of all the racist Immigration Acts.

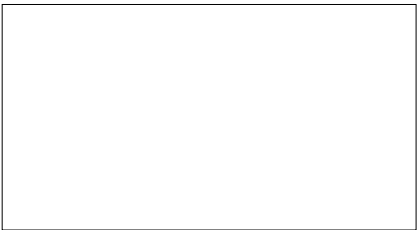
We can only combat racialism by organising the rank and file of the labour movement against it, utilising the strength of the working class. We cannot expect to look to the organs of the capitalist state to abolish what is essentially in its interests...

• *Workers' Fight*, March-April 1968

“No nation will put up with so barefaced an exploitation of the community by a small band of bonus-mongers”



Sir Tom McKillop, ex-Chair of RBS was paid £750,000 in 2007



Plans bonuses despite Government majority ownership

BY COLIN FOSTER

“No nation will put up with so barefaced an exploitation of the community by a small band of dividend-mongers”, wrote Frederick Engels over a hundred years, explaining why he considered full state control of the capitalist economy theoretically plausible but practically unlikely.

If “all the social functions of the capitalist are now performed by salaried employees”, then “the capitalist has no further social function than than of pocketing dividends, tearing off coupons, and gambling on the Stock Exchange”.

Today the capitalist class has devised many other ways of siphoning off income besides dividends. The big banks, all of which owe their continued operation to Government aid, and most of which are now substantially state-owned, are still paying “bonuses” to their top people.

In 2008, of all years, surely there can be no bonuses for “success” for bank bosses. Yet the top people at the Royal Bank of Scotland, about 80% Government-owned, are paying out about £1 billion to themselves in bonuses — £1 billion of the money doled to the bank by the Government to keep it in business.

Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, Dresdner Kleinwort, and Merrill Lynch, all also dependent on Government aid, have already announced £6.4 billion in bonuses, being careful to choose a time just before Christmas to let it be known.

The bankers deserve it because of their special skills? The *Financial Times*, of all papers, reports

that when four top bank bosses were asked by a committee of MPs on 10 February about their banking qualifications, “stripping the irrelevancies, the answer in every case was ‘nil’.”

The Government mumbles and complains, but still says it will not take direct control. The state’s dominant shareholding in the banks is being run at “arm’s length”, by a special agency. The chair of that agency, just appointed, is Glen Moreno, who for nine years until April last year was a “trustee” of Liechtenstein Global Trust (LGT). LGT’s main business is helping rich people hide their wealth out of the reach of tax-collectors: it is currently under investigation for outright tax-cheating by both German and British tax authorities.

The bonus-mongers are being supervised by... another bonus-monger.

The “free market” does not work as a way of regulating the huge concentrations of capital now in play. Production has already become an interconnected social process, rather than a matter of lots of individual units working independently and stimulating each other by competition.

The governments have no choice but to regulate the economy. But then the question is: *who* regulates? In what interest? On what criteria?

This “Labour” government is regulating capitalism with the prime criterion of making the banks profitable again. The labour movement should fight for a workers’ government which will sweep out the “small band of bonus-mongers” and introduce democratic and workers’ control of the economy, with planning for social need which will ensure decent, useful jobs for all workers.

Time to link up student activists!

BY DAN RANDALL

On 20 January, a laughably unrepresentative “extraordinary conference” of the National Union of Students passed its Blairite leaders’ plans to gut the union’s democracy. Under the new constitution, NUS will be far less responsive to rank-and-file initiative and attempts at control than before.

At the same time, from the second week of January, students at universities across the UK organised occupations against Israel’s war in Gaza (as *Solidarity* goes to press, occupations at UEA, Edinburgh and Goldsmiths brought the total number of occupations to 29). These actions have involved many thousands of students and influenced tens of thousands more. While the politics dominating them has often been deeply confused or problematic, they represent an inspiring resurgence of student solidarity, organising and direct action. Yet the deeply bureaucratised and conservative NUS has shown little but hostility to the occupiers.

But this the NUS that is refusing to organise national action — or any action at all — against the threat of the cap on top-up fees being lifted.

However on 25 February, the NUS Women’s, Black Students’ and LGBT campaigns, twenty student unions and activists from across the country will come together for a national demonstration against fees and for free education — a demonstration that was initiated by the Education Not for Sale network. This is the first time that such mass national action, independent of NUS, has taken place for more than a decade, since the Campaign for Free Education demonstrations at the end of the 1990s.

All these developments pose the need for students to get organised on a national scale outside, or at least independently of, NUS. Students involved in the occupations have established national networks; meanwhile many left-led student unions are talking about disaffiliation from NUS. How should these forces relate to each other? How can a new national student organising centre be built?

Left activists in the student movement urgently need to start discussing these issues. And how does a wave of occupations against tuition fees sound? Education Not for Sale will be taking the lead.

• On 7 March, ENS and student activists are hosting a meeting to discuss the way forward. For more information email education.not.for.sale@gmail.com

Individuals: £20 per year (22 issues) waged, £10 unwaged.
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